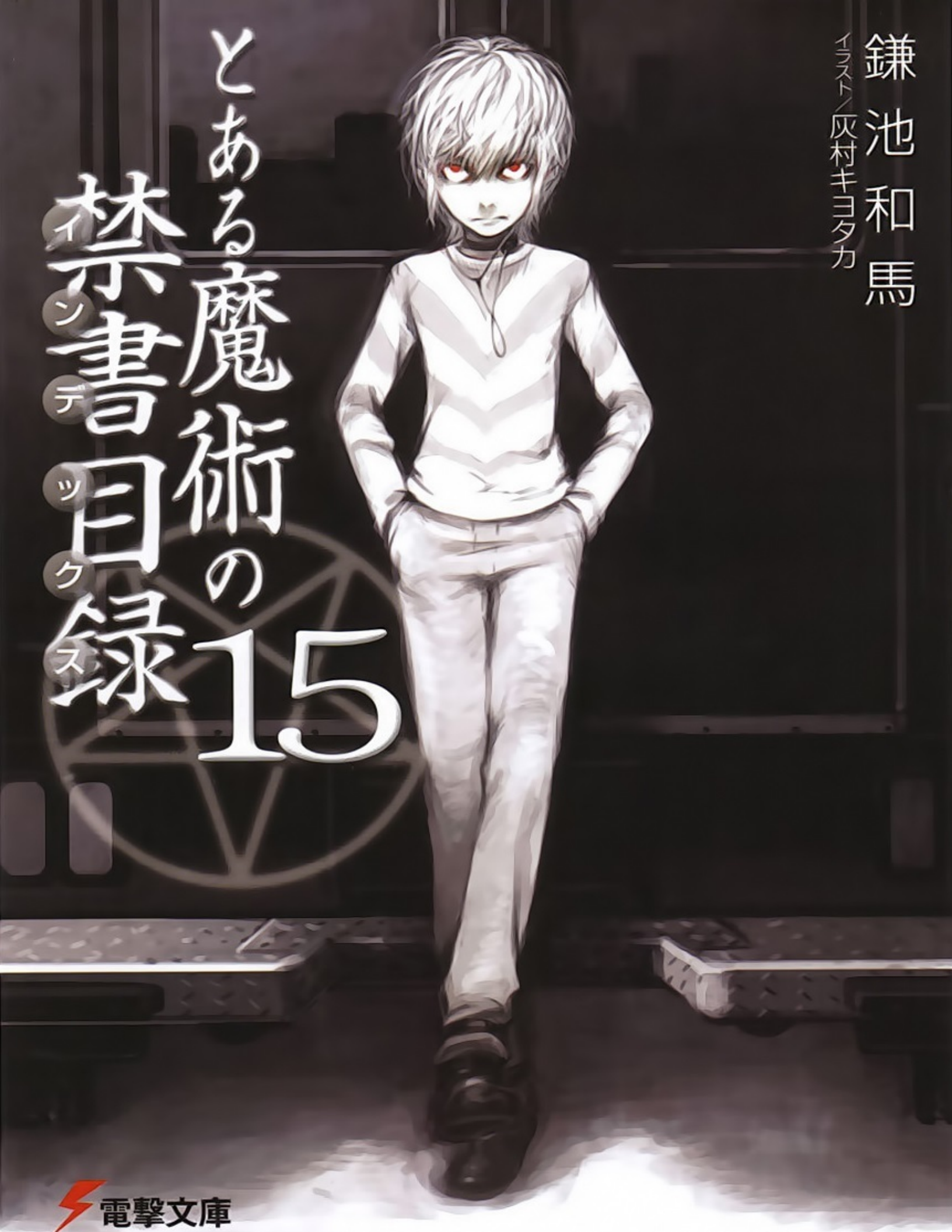
とある魔術の禁書目録（インデックス）15
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Toaru Majutsu no Index - Volume 15

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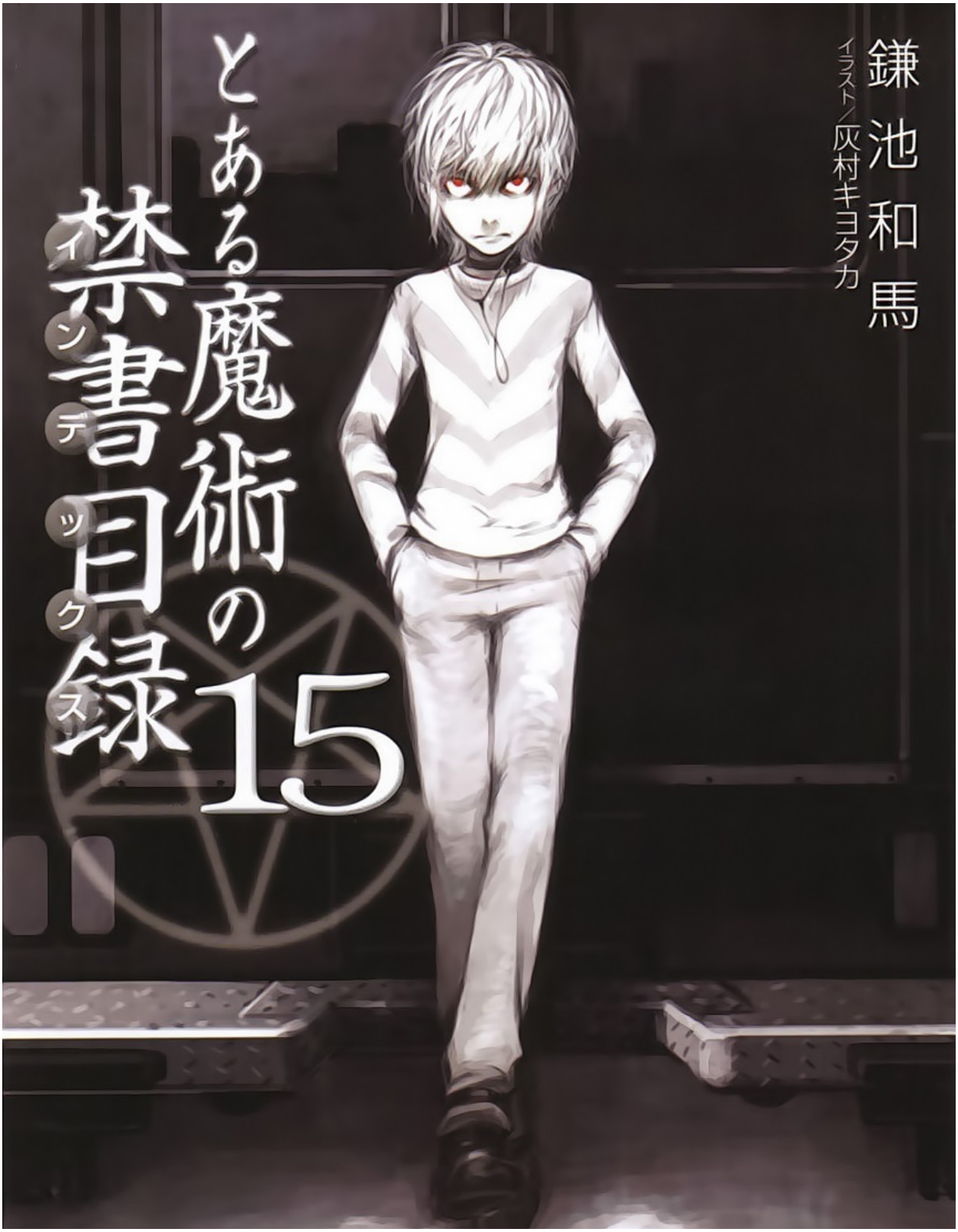
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Toaru Majutsu no Index 15

Due to the invasion of Avignon, the public safety force of Academy City was largely absent. Now that the place has become a lawless area, shady organizations are conducting their secret manoeuvres.

—Those who operate for their own sake.

—Those who like the darkness, and enjoy the act of killing.

—Those who intend to crush the hopes and aspirations of others.

—Those who fight for the sake of people important to them.

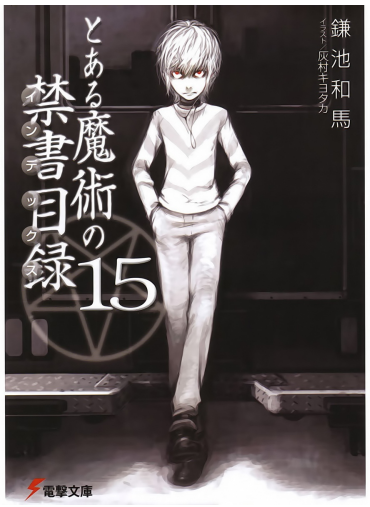
—Those who challenge the upper strata society to a fight.

—Those who bring down rebellious elements.

—Those who hold back violent rampages.

Just who will survive in this city, where everything is governed by science...

When the Level 5 Accelerator of "GROUP" makes a chance encounter with the mysterious group "SCHOOL", this is when the story shall begin...!



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とある魔術の禁書目録(インデックス)⑮

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Kamachi Kazuma

This is Book 15, where the villains start to play an active role! There are a lot of battles, so it's really interesting to see various places in Academy City become the stage of battle. Even then, there are still quite a lot of school districts that have yet to make an appearance. I'm having problems deciding where the setting should be on the next occasion.

(Products of Dengeki Bunko)

Toaru Majutsu no Index 1~15
Toaru Majutsu no Index SS

Illustrator: Haimura Kiyotaka

Recently, the amount of coffee I drink has been rising. I ended up thinking about crazy things like buying a roaster to roast coffee beans on my own since coffee maker alone is starting to make me unsatisfied.

カバー／表印刷

LIVE
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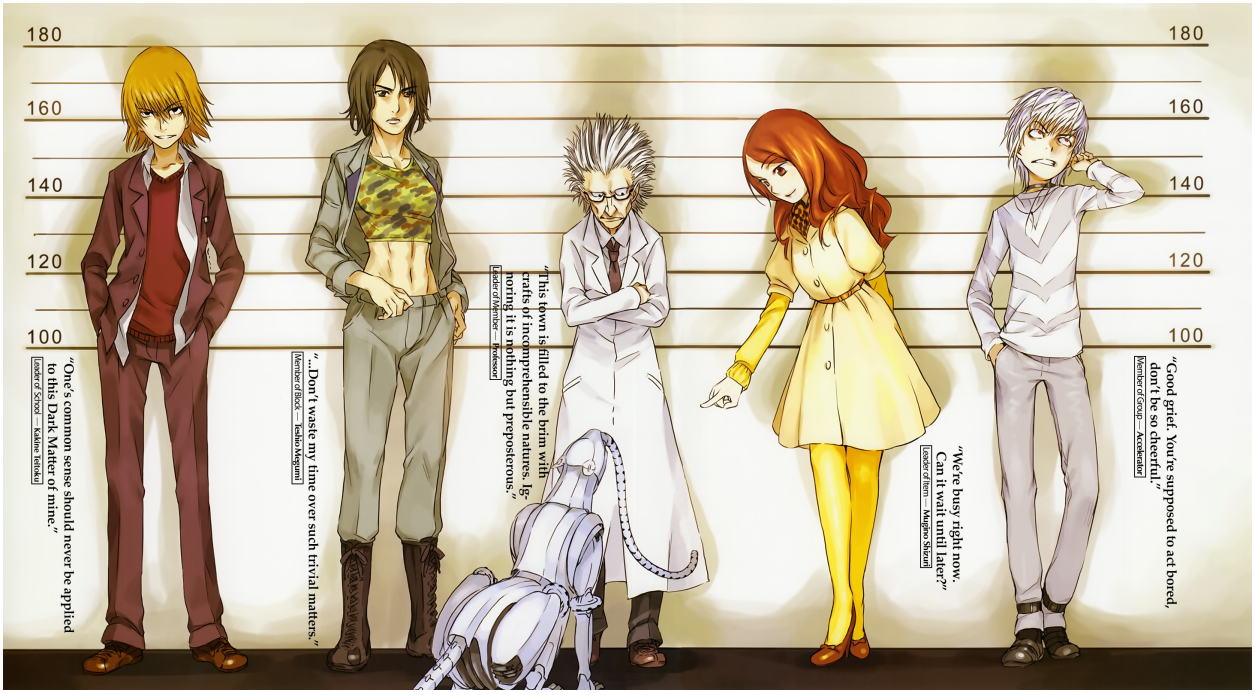
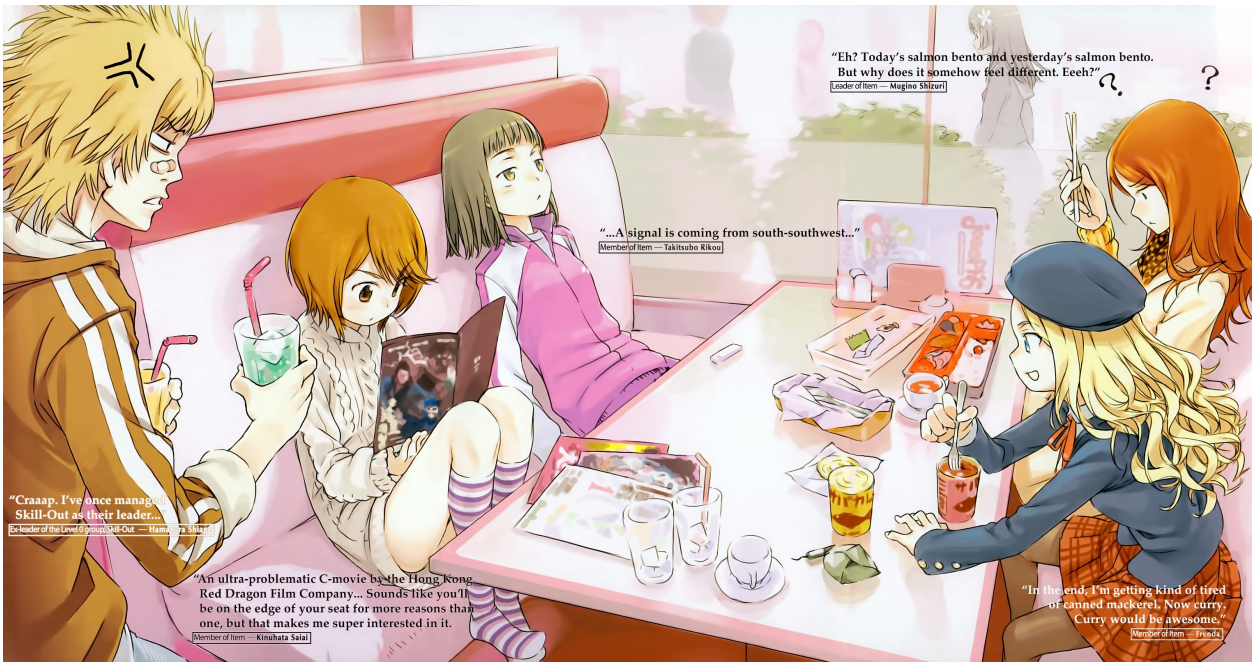

180
160
140
120
100
"One's common sense should never be applied to this Dark Matter of mine."
Leader of School — Kakine Teitoku
"...Don't waste any time over such trivial matters."
Member of Block — Ikaiko Meguriai
"This town is filled to the brim with crafts of incomprehensible natures. Ig-noring it is nothing but preposterous."
Leader of Member — Professor
"We're busy right now. Can it wait until later?"
Leader of Item — Mugino Shizuri
"Good grief. You're supposed to act bored, don't be so cheerful."
Member of Group — Accelerator


"Eh? Today's salmon bento and yesterday's salmon bento. But why does it somehow feel different. Eeeh?"
Leader of Item — Mugino Shizuri
"...A signal is coming from south-southwest..."
Member of Item — Takitsubo Rikou
"Craaap. I've once manage... Skill-Out as their leader...
Ex-leader of the Level 0 group, Skill-Out — Hama... Shiai
"An ultra-problematic C-movie by the Hong Kong Red Dragon Film Company... Sounds like you'll be on the edge of your seat for more reasons than one, but that makes me super interested in it.
Member of Item — Kinuhata Saiai
"In the end, I'm getting kind of tired of canned mackerel. Now curry. Curry would be awesome."
Member of Item — Frenda

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"Mmutzu! Misaka can feel the response of a lost child from the coffee shop over there...!!"

Administrator of the Misaka series — **Last Order**

"W-wait up, Ahoge-chan!?"

Member of Academy City's Judgement — **Uiharu Kazari**

Prologue: The Finest Lead Bullet for You, My Dear.
Management.

There were blind spots.

For example, the janitor closet of a large department store.

The department store staff thought that it was being used by outside janitors, and the janitor staff thought that it was being used by department store staff. Since it was off-limits to customers, no security cameras were installed, and nobody had their eyes on it. As a result, nobody entered it even when everybody knew about it, turning it into a room which even the key-holders didn't enter.

An iron door normally kept it closed.

But today was different.

Tsuchimikado Motoharu used a previously obtained key, and opened one such door located in a corner. Inside, the interior design was like that of a small bar.

In front of him was a large sofa that could seat more than ten; beside it was a long, small table. Further in was something like a bar counter. It was plain clear that the world changed past that door.

"Welcome,"

Upon spotting Tsuchimikado come in, a cheerful man's voice flowed from within.

Standing opposite the counter was a man even shorter than Tsuchimikado, probably a college student. Matching his frivolous looks, his attire was some type of brand-name suit. With no necktie, three of the shirt's buttons were unfastened, which revealed his chest.

With four or five cell phones swinging from his neck, the man's popular name was Management.

As he leaned onto the counter with his elbow, he said, "Oh, my bad, my bad. Showing a light side is part of the service industry; this is to create a mood where we can speak easily. I'll cease it if it offends you, how about it?"

"Nah, this will do."

As Tsuchimikado said that, Management broadly smiled.

Tsuchimikado threw the key he carried, and Management caught it with one hand. And with the business over, Management moved out the furniture, changing into other concerns.

"Well, then, I wonder what kind of stuff you're looking for. Today, the excellent sensor busters for unlocking are a bargain. Shit is bad for those in for money laundering. As usual, we're at a shortage due to the new regulations that came in after the September 30th incident. For the rest, it's business as usual."

Several people were involved in robberies and thefts.

In such cases, there was a division of roles like transporters, lock picking, breaking-in, and money laundering, but amongst them, the problem of "They wanna rob, but they're short on hands" came up.

Management was the person who supplied the necessary manpower and earned referral fees from doing so.

"Even so, it's the net or email nowadays; people like you making a direct visit is rare."

"Is what I've done bad?"

"Nah. There's no risk for this time. Ah, yes, you want a drink?"

Tsuchimikado scanned the shelf behind Management. Upon seeing massive cans, he slightly frowned.

"I'm not into drinking paint thinners."

"Don't misunderstand me. Those solvents are for wiping off oil-based inks; important stuff for business like this. The alcohol's inside the ref. And it's the really good stuff that's gathered inside."

"Either way, I'll pass."

Even as Tsuchimikado declined, Management's complexion didn't especially change.

"No time to be both tense and drunk, eh. Oh, well, that's to be expected for such work. Let's continue with the business. What item do you want?"

"Sorry. I'm not looking for items, either."

"?"

Tsuchimikado easily said that to a puzzled Management.

"I'm not here as a customer. I'm here as a catcher."

Management was agape for only a moment.

However, when he saw Tsuchimikado draw his pistol from his belt, he immediately dove for cover behind the counter.

Tsuchimikado unconcernedly pulled the trigger.

Successive *BAM!BAM!BAM!* gunshots echoed. Punching holes into the paint thinner cans on the shelf behind the counter, a disagreeable smell immediately filled the room.

(That bastard...!?)

Management, remaining hidden, reached for the bulletproof jacket and submachine gun hidden behind the counter.

As soon as he inserted a magazine and pulled on the slide to load the bullets, Tsuchimikado's gunshots suddenly stopped. Management raised up his head to ascertain the situation.

(Is he out of bullets?)

A thinner-stained Management thought that, but he immediately got a different answer.

The scratching of an oil lighter.

"!!?"

Management's throat dried up.

Before he could say anything, Tsuchimikado threw the lit oil lighter onto the counter.

Management had no time to think about anything. Chucking off his bulletproof jacket and submachine gun, he jumped out from within the thinner-filled counter.

The oil lighter fell onto the thinner puddle, and a *VOOM!* explosive flame rolled up.

Management, having barely escaped it, noticed that the handgun was jammed right into him.

He raised his hands up, and loudly said, "WAIT, WAIT! I GOT IT, I GOT IT! I SURRENDER—"

Tsuchimikado absentmindedly pulled the trigger.

Along with a *BAM!* discharging sound, Management frighteningly looked at his own side.

There, a dark red hole had opened up.

"Y-you, bitch. I told you I surrender…"

Trying to say something, Management collapsed onto the floor.

Tsuchimikado, with no particular change in expression, first checked if Management was breathing, then brought out his cell phone.

Punching in a registered number, he curtly reported to the answering party.

"Time for collection."

The person on the phone said something back.

Tsuchimikado continued to reply.

"After this, I'll look for his address and check out various stuff. Get in touch with the grunt groups. No, not an ambulance, a paddy wagon will do. I'll look for info based on the registered address, and Accelerator is… gone?"

Tsuchimikado clicked his tongue.

"I see; he's doing stuff over there right now, eh. Can't be helped, then. You're going out, Unabara. And take over for Musujime as backup. See you then."

Tsuchimikado hung up his cell phone.

Tsuchimikado Motoharu, Accelerator, Unabara Mitsuki, and Musujime Awaki.

Those four were designated Group.

A small group that existed in the underworld, working to defend the mainstream society.

Chapter 1: An Unmistakable Gun, Unheard by All. *Compass.*

Part 1

October 9.

Today, Academy City's independence day, was a holiday within the city limits.

A carefree atmosphere had enveloped it since morning, even at the hospital in District 7. The frog-faced doctor had stepped out of the front entrance, and was basking in the gentle morning sunlight.

A tiny 10-year-old girl stood beside the doctor.

A girl named Last Order.

She had been taken away on September 30 by Hound Dogs led by Kihara Amata, and Testament had been used to inject special data into her brain. The removal of that data was being performed up until now; with the work over, she had been discharged from the hospital.

"Nobody's coming even with you finally discharged from the hospital?"

The doctor asked in a shocked tone, but Last Order did not seem to mind it very much and said,

"Misaka will board the taxi alone, says Misaka as Misaka tries to puff her chest out while announcing it."

"Well, the virus inside your head has been completely destroyed, so there's nothing to worry about. Yomikawa-san has paid the taxi fare in advance, so you're heading straight for her mansion, okay?"

Just at that moment, the taxi turned up onto the hospital circle.

The frog-faced doctor flagged the taxi down, and lifted a luggage-burdened Last Order into the back seat.

As the driver watched over them, he said,

"Passenger, where to?"

"The amusement part in District 6! Says Misaka as Misa—"

"Number two building of the Family Side apartment in District 7. Don't forget it, okay?"

With him blocking the nonsense Last Order was spouting, the frog-faced doctor was stuck with caring for them after all.

As the driver smiled wryly,

"Acknowledged."

"Do I have to tell you the location in detail?"

"No sir. This town is full of student dormitories so apartments are far and few between. I can search for them with my car navigator if I get the apartment name."

As the frog-faced doctor pulled back from within the taxi, the rear door closed itself automatically. With Last Order—both hands on the window and looking outside—on board, the taxi carefully maneuvered itself out of the hospital grounds.

With the taxi gone, he went back to his hospital work. Walking through the clean

walkway, he entered the visiting area where only simple sofas and tables were arranged, and bought coffee at a nearby vending machine.

The vending machine was the kind that used paper cups. Liquid coffee was not poured into the metallic box, but instead it automatically ground pre-roasted beans. It took some time, but the flavor and strength was reasonably good.

Phew, the doctor exhaled and,

(Well then, I'm finishing the Sisters' adjustments, so I have to be out of here as soon as possible—)

At that moment, the frog-faced doctor's thinking was suddenly interrupted.

Poke

Someone's handgun was pressing against his back.

The frog-faced doctor's movement stopped.

Audible shallow breathing from right behind him reached his ears; he paused for a bit, then said,

"You've already come back from Avignon?"

"Tch. So you've heard the news."

It was a familiar voice. Accelerator's.

Accelerator was leaning on a modernistic cane with his right hand, but they were in a hospital complex so he didn't particularly stand out. And he was using his own body to prevent others from seeing the gun in his left hand.

The doctor did not raise his hands.

For the sake of his patient behind him, he did not take such a visible action, and whispered,

"...What a fine greeting we have here, eh?"

"I want info. The electrode designs."

Accelerator was talking about the choker on his neck. It looked like an accessory, but in fact an electrode was inserted behind it, capable of transforming Accelerator's brain waves into a different signal and allowing limited connectivity to the special electronic communications network known as the Misaka Network.

The frog-faced doctor, the one who had prepared that electrode, answered without any change in emotions,

"Why do you need the schemes? Aren't you letting me fix the choker if it's not working?"

"Just give me the schemes."

"Last Order wanted to see you. It would have been better if you had come out a little earlier."

"Zip it. This has nothing to do with you."

"Wrong. And it's because the patient wanted to meet you. Arranging that is my job."

"Tch... Had I known that, I wouldn't have waited for this timing. Shitheads."

Accelerator said, sounding genuinely annoyed.

The frog-faced doctor put his hand into one of his lab coat's pockets and brought out something like a pencil-lead case. A USB stick. Holding it tight, he moved his hand backwards.

"You're prepared, eh."

"That's what I told you, right? Preparing for my patients' needs is my job."

The doctor said this while looking at the vending machine that was continuing its operations.

"Nonetheless, won't it be difficult to apply its contents? I did all of the creation of the important parts myself, you see? If you are to work on an identical electrode, you have to start from manufacturing using machine tools."

"..."

Accelerator took the USB stick and silently departed from the back of the frog-faced doctor.

The frog-faced doctor turned around.

No one was standing there. Accelerator had already used vector control to jump into the nearest stairway, leaving nothing, not even a shadow.

"..."

The doctor gazed for a while at the empty space.

A *beep* electronic sound was heard. The frog-faced doctor retrieved the coffee from the vending machine's pickup slot, and sipped on the bitter liquid.

Part 2

Unabara Mitsuki was in a room in a certain apartment in District 7.

Building number two of the Family Side apartment building.

It was a spacious 4LDK room meant for residential use. But if one were to see the interior, it would be clear that only one person had been living here. One could guess just by looking at the uninhabited rooms. Even the neighbors would probably feel like that.

Unabara was checking it out while using the phone to talk with Tsuchimikado.

"...First off, I've arrived at Management's room. I'll start the investigation now. Possible places for storing information...PC, HD video recorder, and even game consoles are equipped with storage media, right?"

"If it's even a small possibility, then take them all. Even memory chips from rice cookers and washing machines, dismantle them to preserve every bit of information."

Looks like I'm in for some grunt work, Unabara grumbled.

"At any rate, what kind of business assistance is Management doing?"

"I'm checking on that now."

Tsuchimikado answered, seemingly bored.

"Ten hours or so back, some kind of criminal organization had been organized with Management's efforts. They are, from the start, the kind to cover up the shortcomings. And they're the kind that pay up to obtain ready firepower from the outside. Soon the incident will certainly occur. Investigating and stopping them beforehand is our job."

"Was it really necessary to bring Group in for this?"

"Just get moving. I know you want to complain, but it's all the same for the kind of work that gets sent to Group. Nothing but shit."

Acknowledged, Unabara replied.

Walking through the spacious room, he attached tiny tags onto gadgets like PCs and video recorders. He had no intention of carrying out stuff like refrigerators and washing machines. For now he'd attach marks onto stuff, and he'd have the grunt group carry them out afterward.

(Well, of all the places.)

Almost finished with the task, Unabara found something that bothered him.

It was paper money.

Several stacks of paper money had been left on top of a waist-high shelf.

That in itself was not unnatural, but he felt like it had been kept separate from the wallets. Unabara checked the room for a bit, looking for credit cards and

passbooks.

The arrangement of stuff inside the room closely matched the resident's lifestyle. However, with Unabara's diagnosis, it was likely that the paper money left on the shelf was unnatural. Since it had been kept apart from any wallets, it was likely that the person was keeping others' paper money from mixing in.

Unabara looked at the paper money again, and then called Tsuchimikado back,

"Tsuchimikado-san, do you have devices to read information from IC chips?"

"Why?"

"I've found five stacks of paper money. Surely, IC chips are attached to Japanese money issued by the Academy City mint. I believe we'd better check these out, too."

"Understood, I'll have them prepare it...No valuable information found on my side. I'll finish up the department store's cleaning room, and head for your—"

Tsuchimikado's words weren't heard to the end.

BOOM!!

A rocket suddenly flew in, breaking through the window, and exploding right in the middle of the room.

Several *pit-pat!pit-pat!* footsteps echoed from the entrance way.

Dark grey-armored men swiftly broke into the room, even as they scanned for traps. Heads uniformly covered with face masks, these five people laden with matching equipment had no personality.

Communicating silently through hand signals, they split into two groups and carried out the investigation of the charred remains inside the former 4LDK, which had been widened when the thin outer wall had crumbled down on top of the air conditioner that had fallen from the wall and onto the floor. Not only were the automatic fire extinguisher facilities not working, even the normal fire alarms were not working. They had cut off the security well in advance.

Since they did not exchange any words, only small *kacha kacha* metallic sounds strangely echoed out.

It was the sound of hard armor hitting metal because they had brought small arms and they were on the move.

(Good grief...)

Unabara Mitsuki sighed as he looked over the situation. He was against the kitchen wall, observing the status through a door that had been bent due to the destructive shockwave.

He had jumped into the room at the same time the rocket smashed through the window.

And as he brought out his obsidian knife from his side,

(With the entire room blown away, the information must have been destroyed. Looks like people worried about Management's information getting obtained have come out to greet us.)

He was on the third floor.

Moving soundlessly, he approached the side of a destroyed window. Even looking from there, there were about fifteen black-clad men. Probably more in unseen places; he was completely surrounded.

His disintegration magic Lance of Tlahuizcalpantecuhtli was an extremely strong magic that launched a dazzling light, absolutely disintegrating everything that was hit by its light.

But on the other hand, he could only set one target at a time.

In short, in exchange for "one strike, one kill, no matter how strong the prey", it becomes "one strike, one kill, no matter how weak the prey".

(My opponents have 9mm sub-machine guns and 9mm handguns. If they fire them in this narrow space, I'll be turned into a rag doll, no matter what magic I have.)

Most importantly, Unabara remarked,

(This is untimely. Lots of small fry coming out at this time is really untimely.)

Even breaking through the crowd of black-clads in one go by any means had no significance due to the apartment's passages and doorways serving as boundaries. He would be restricted by them, causing a human jam.

Even if an attacking party was few in number, the large number of people surrounding the apartment would crush any possibility of their target escaping. Also, even in cases where the first attacking party was annihilated by the target, the next attacking party could choose not to form up and rush in, since they would know at once that the enemy had not been killed by the rocket, so the next phase would be blowing up and destroying the entire apartment block.

(...They're well-practiced, eh? Even if they get stalled here, it doesn't mean they'll lift up their siege net. It's a definite stalemate...)

Unabara Mitsuki again grasped his obsidian knife.

Before he knew it, his palm was drenched in sweat.

(Well, what to do now?)

Part 3

"Fire outbreak in District 7. Condition five report confirmed. Security and automatic fire-fighting systems of the target building are not working, immediate firefighting requested."

At the emergency communications center where information was dispatched to Anti-Skill and Judgment, a female operator was relaying the information displayed on her monitor to the relevant organizations.

"An additional Anti-Skill inspection sortie to serve as fire brigade on-site inspection witnesses has been requested. And also—"

The operator let her eyes off the monitor for a few seconds, trying to get the manual sheets for a fire incident that was pasted on the communications booth wall.

At that time, the response from the on-site team that had been waiting for concrete instructions came,

"Acknowledged."

The voice said this, then the transmission ends.

"...eh?"

The female operator was mystified.

Displayed on screen, all the important communications had already been carried out.

Part 4

It had been fifteen minutes since the apartment room was blown away by a rocket.

Tsuchimikado Motoharu and Musujime Awaki were in an apartment room in the Family Side Building no. 2.

There were no fire brigades or Anti-Skill personnel. Here and there, bystanders could be seen surrounding the building, but no one entered. After all, there had been an explosion. And they wouldn't dare enter considering the danger included

in fire and destruction.

The apartments had been constructed for residential use, but the rooms were used almost only for solitary living. On top of it, apartment tenants were overwhelmingly faculty, outweighing even the students in number. Because Academy City had rounded up Anti-Skill for war preparations, shifting the task of preparing the lesson materials to the other teachers, the rooms were empty even on a national holiday.

"Right here."

Originally a high-class 4LDK mansion, the middle of the room had been blown out by explosives, even the furniture and inner walls had crumbled down. Thanks to that, the apartment now only had about two rooms. One could see the bathroom just by passing through the main door.

"They've thoroughly destroyed the evidence. Even bringing in those skilled in telepathy might do us no good."

Musujime muttered as she looked at the blackened floor.

The one late in coming, Accelerator, finally turned up leaning on his cane.

"Tch. Just when I was thinking that it's a summon, it's yet another enjoyable garbage disposal job from the top."

Tsuchimikado, without looking at Accelerator, said,

"You finished with your errand?"

"Shuddup."

Accelerator halfheartedly rejected it and looked at the surroundings.

"Is this the spot where that idiot Unabara disappeared?"

"Yup. For now, Management is a live captive, and being transported on the paddy wagon of the grunt groups, but my level of confidence for his verbal-only information is low. And he's only strangely whining and saying stuff like "the info stays only in my head." I sent Unabara here for the support data we need,

but then..."

Tsuchimikado, in a dull voice, said,

"During that time, he was probably attacked from the third floor. In this situation, I still don't know whether it's that Unabara himself is targeted or that Management's information is targeted, but from the looks of it, it's the latter. The report from Unabara beforehand is that there is stuff like personal computers and HD recorders, but they've disappeared like magic. Everything was taken away, even the AI-equipped appliances."

"At least it appears there's an appliance left behind here."

Musujime was lifting up a blackened microwave oven with her foot. It immediately rolled onto the floor.

"Perhaps it's one of those not loaded with AI. A type where one cannot input additional info into it: it would be thrown away just like that."

Investigating the room, there was, in addition, a broken-down TV and electric iron. But all the important stuff had probably been taken away.

Accelerator sat down on the disemboweled bed,

And exhaled, seemingly uninterested.

"Tch, what a bother. We know shit about that bastard Management's information. And we know shit about what happened to Unabara. Good grief, make sure that if it's your job, you bastards had better deal with it."

He lightly kicked at the destroyed microwave oven rolling nearby.

At that instant, the plastic-made door opened and the contents spilled out.

"...hm?"

It was the paper money.

The five stacks of soot-stained paper money were somehow stuffed into the microwave oven.

"The report says that we're worried about Unabara."

Musujime, who had bent down to pickup the bills, chuckled as she said that.

"There should be the anti-counterfeiting IC chips within these bills. Something might be written in them. By putting them into the microwave oven, they can be sealed off from radio signals. Even if, for example, the attackers carry a sensor just for them, that would probably be tricked into not detecting them."

"...Did that shitty bastard hide them in advance?"

Just as Accelerator inquired, Tsuchimikado, standing apart from them, raised his voice as he said, 'hm?'.

Looking closely, a man's corpse was stuffed inside the closet Tsuchimikado had opened up. On closer examination, its skin by the right calf leg was completely torn off.

Tsuchimikado sighed and said,

"This is Unabara's work."

"That act done at the foot? Is it that bastard's hobby?"

Musujime grimaced on hearing these words. Her feet were once injured in an accident during class. The trauma of that time had not vanished yet. To make it worse, her trauma was so bad she had to use low-frequency vibration medical equipment to reduce the stress every time she used her ability.

Tsuchimikado shook his head.

"He uses human skin to create one kind of a talisman. You guys don't know magic so I'll make the explanation of theories brief...but the point is, **he has the skill to substitute as other people**."

While looking at the foot injury of the corpse, Tsuchimikado said,

"That Unabara bastard has totally changed places with this one. Now he's mixed with the guys who attacked here, waiting for an opportunity."

In short, Tsuchimikado acknowledged,

"That masquerading bastard is still alive. And I don't know where he is laughing now."

Part 5

What are they doing?, Uiharu Kazari cocked her head in puzzlement.

In front of her was a taxi, stopped as if at a red light. Inside, a young girl about 10-years-old was quarreling with the driver... Or rather, the girl appeared to be having a one-sided quarrel.

Uiharu didn't have to be near just to hear the loud voice.

"'Misaka is saying to let me off here, let me off here — why you won't let Misaka go!?' says Misaka as Misaka tries to protest with hands on her hips and cheeks puffing!!"

"Well, you see, I've already received the fare to the destination. Stopovers are—"

"'Misaka will try to attempt an escape at that opportunity of an excuse!!' Misaka says as Misaka gets down from the car at high speed and rushes for the back alleys!!"

As the little girl screamed, she had already entered into the narrow alleyway that seemed too small for even a bicycle to go through.

Uiharu approached the driver as he was scratching his head and saying 'I give up.'

"Hm? Oh dear, are you Judgment?"

The driver said upon seeing Uiharu's armband.

Judgment was a student organization tasked with keeping order in Academy City. Though those tasks were mainly within schools, the distinctions did not seem to stick much to normal townspeople.

Uiharu, with a puzzled face,

"Errr, is there some sort of trouble? Like that child getting off and going somewhere without paying?"

"It's the other way around, the other way."

The driver, with an embarrassed face,

"I got the fare beforehand from someone that appears to be that child's guardian, and was supposed to send the child to the guardian's apartment. And so the child went off on the way, and I can't even give the change to her."

"Ah. The passenger can do like she pleases, so can you take the change as a tip?"

"The taxi fare is ¥1200. The deposit given to me beforehand is ¥5000. To take that as a tip would hurt my conscience."

What a kind person, Uiharu thought to herself.

The driver shifted his gaze onto the alley that was obviously too narrow for his car,

"...Even so, I need get out to go chase her, as expected."

"Shall I go look for her?"

"Yes please, I'd appreciate it if you could do that."

The driver used a machine inside his taxi to output a receipt, placed the change on top of it, and handed it to Uiharu. Uiharu was in no condition to look out for special monetary problems due to her Judgment armband attached to her.

"Please bring her back."

"Got it."

Uiharu stored the change in her skirt pocket and exchanged contact addresses just in case with the taxi driver, before turning to the narrow alley and setting off.

Facing the sunlight-less gloomy space, she called out,

"Errr, what's your name? Umm, Ahoge-chan[1]!?"

"'Misaka's identifier is Last Order!!' says Misaka as Misaka—ha!?"

With a reply coming back at once, Uiharu walked to where it had come from and captured the little girl.

Part 6

Black smoke was rising.

A block paddy wagon had stopped, having rammed into the guardrail. But that was only for the front half. The entire body had been ripped apart, so the rear half was rolling in the middle of the highway.

It was the same model used by the Anti-Skill, but its affiliation was different. It was a paddy wagon used by the lower echelons of Group. Through Tsuchimikado's instructions, they were secretly transporting a certain suspect.

"Oww, dammit..."

Emerging from the newly bisected vehicle was a male college student. Management. Alighting on the asphalt while shaking both of his shackled hands, he grimaced at his own stomach. The spot where the bullet had gone through had opened and the blood was once again spreading out, staining over the dark-red stains which had started to dry.

Nevertheless, upon looking at the lad approaching him, he expressed a meek smile.

"Sorry 'bout it. I've blundered."

"Don't mind it, I'm the one who should say that."

The lad had metallic goggles on his face. And no, it was different. It was not just covering his eyes; it was surrounding his entire head just like Saturn's rings. Plugs were inserted into it all around, and countless cables connected them to a machine at his back.

Management held out both his hands at the strangely-dressed lad and,

"Sorry, but can you unlock this? I may not be able to compensate for it, but looking for the keys would be troublesome. And leaving here early might be good for us."

I understand, the lad said, swiftly moving his fingers as if swiping a card.

In that instant, both of Management's hands and head were crushed.

"A,
AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!?"

Management, writhing around, looked up at the lad with eyes full of pain and surprise. The lad, gazing at them, simply informed him with almost no change in tone while aiming for Management's vitals.

"Too bad."

Part 7

Group was one cold-hearted group.

The remaining three members had put their investigation of Unabara's mysterious disappearance on hold. However, even if there were a slight hint they wouldn't know whether to go save him or not. The standard idea in "Group" was that each member had to deal with their own problems.

And so,

"It's from the Group grunts. It seems the paddy wagon Management was on had been attacked."

"A massacre?"

"Nah. Kindly speaking, all apart from Management have been rendered unconscious. Either way, we lost our chance of hearing him out directly."

"Aren't there any clues of who did this?"

"That's why that guy left these cash notes behind."

For now, they had to start from the paper money.

The Group trio, having left from the Family Side apartment building number two, returned for the time being to one of their hideouts and decided to examine the electronic data stored on the IC chips from the paper money.

"Even so, this hideout is an empty store at the underground shopping complex. What if an expectant corporate dropout comes to peek in?"

"When that time comes we're out of here. We have hideouts are all over the place; these shops are set up for them anyway."

Tsuchimikado lightheartedly said, then set a paper money-reading device onto the floor.

And connecting to the laptop via cable was,

"...What's that?"

Musujime inquired inquisitively. Tsuchimikado chuckled at her.

It was a sensor for cell phone wallets located at the side of cash registers in convenience stores.

"Well... It's a bother, so I asked a supplier to bring in a reader."

"Well whatever it is I don't particularly care."

Accelerator said, while sitting in a pipe chair and tending to his handgun.

"Get cracking."

"Got it."

Tsuchimikado simply replied, picking a pile from the five stacks of paper money and swiping it through the equipment.

Not even the name of the country was displayed on screen. It was merely a clutter of numbers. Tsuchimikado then worked in the terminal, finally changing them into words with some significance.

"We've got a sudden hit, eh."

Tsuchimikado squinted at the characters displayed on screen.

"...Looks like Management's shopping list. His dealings are with a single professional sniper. Oh yeah, it looks like trouble just by the sniper's weapon."

He swiped the second pile through the equipment.

"Sniper's name is Sunazara Chimitsu. ...Alias unknown. Recorded personal history and abilities are unreliable. But just from the ¥700,000 referral fee, he's one nice bargain item."

He then swiped the third pile through the equipment.

"This is about the sniper's weapon. What's prepared is...the MSR-001. Magnetic Sniping Rifle."

Tsuchimikado said with a pained voice.

"Magnetic, you say?"

"As its name says, it is a sniper rifle that uses electromagnets to fire steel bullets. Of course it's made in Academy City. Its construction is even simpler than that of a railgun. Muzzle velocity is 280m/s. Almost the speed of sound."

"...That might be something. Although I hear that normal sniper rifles do good on performance."

However, Tsuchimikado laughingly said,

"In sheer power, true. However, this one does not use gunpowder, so there's no recoil. Without the shock that most sniper rifles produce, sensitive aiming equipment can be attached very precisely. When using gunpowder, a certain amount of strength is required to withstand the recoil during firing. What's more..."

"What's more?"

"If gunpowder isn't used, then there's no sound. It's most suited for killing stealthily."

As he said those, Tsuchimikado swiped the fourth pile through the equipment.

However, only errors displayed on screen.

They could not read the essential data.

"Dammit. The IC chips must have been busted by heat or shock. From just what we can see from the fragmentary header data, it looks like the definite business partner who hired the sniper is written here."

No matter how many time he tried to swipe the pile through, the contents of the paper bills still couldn't be displayed.

Tsuchimikado gave up for now, and swiped the last pile of bills.

Displayed on screen was a rough sketch of some location.

It was a simplified map, with everything but the important buildings eliminated. A red dot was marked in the middle and numbers were written beside the surrounding buildings, indicating things like how many buildings there were and

total distance. Indecipherable information for only such an overhead map.

Tsuchimikado smiled upon seeing it.

"Looks like the sniping plans. Did Management handle it this far?"

"Heh. A great grocery store, that one."

"The location's the front plaza at the District 7 concert hall...."

Musujime looked up at the ceiling and,

"Just above this place eh."

"The concert hall front plaza is being chartered for an address by one of the general board of directors. I dare say that VIP is the sniping target. Name's Oyafune Monaka. I don't know what kind of plans the opposition is using to strike at the top, but it appears they are plotting an outrageous plan to assassinate Oyafune. By stopping this our work will be complete. ...For Unabara, well, forget him. The one with the lowest 'score' in this job will have to play punishment game and go save him."

"Sigh. From here on we run and chase after the sniper? Why don't we just ditch this bothersome job and stop the useless address?"

Accelerator said with a really irritating voice, but Tsuchimikado shook his head.

"That would be impossible."

"Hah?"

"It's simple. The address has already started."

Part 8

Both Accelerator and Tsuchimikado had left the underground shopping complex, and finally arrived at the front plaza of the concert hall that was right above them.

They did it not by decent means like stairs or elevators, but by using Musujime's ability Move Point. That ability was very convenient, but there was a weakness where she had difficulty in moving herself with it. And so only Musujime remained at the hideout, continuing the analysis of the paper bills' IC chips.

Since it was a holiday, there were many students in the plaza. Even though the open-air speech of the general board of directors was not interesting, just by looking around there were about two, three hundred students that had gathered.

From Accelerator's position to Oyafune Monaka, the distance was around 100m.

A simple stage used for cultural festivals had been built in the middle of the plaza; a middle-aged woman stood on the stage. About four black-suited bodyguards stood guard around her, but then,

"No way I'm doin' this."

Accelerator cut off with these words.

"Dammit, just shout out loud, 'please shoot through my precious organs'. That damned VIP, she completely doesn't understand that one can see she has no body armor just by looking at her getup."

"Shut it. That's where we come into play."

"Even among the same general board of directors, that bastard Shiokishi is always in his powered suit around the clock. He's not afraid of attack, but he's probably insecure when he's not in one."

"That's one hell of a habit."

On Tsuchimikado's words, Accelerator glanced at the person beside him.

He looked on, agape at the on-stage Oyafune Monaka and asked,

"You have the balls to be that person's shield?"

"What do you mean?"

"For me it's a collusion. This general board of directors. It's one gathering of shitty bastards. As if they're targets worth especially protecting by covering them with yourself."

Accelerator knew a person called Thomas Platinumburg. Just like Oyafune he was one of the general board of directors. Accelerator hadn't talked with him much, but just by looking at his tastes in furniture he knew right away that Platinumburg was a person who would naturally and without malice look down on others.

"There are two kinds in Academy City's top brass."

As Tsuchimikado slipped through the crowd at the concert hall front plaza, he said with a small voice,

"At the top are shitty bastards who must die and good people who were regarded as the same with the former even though they work seriously. In most cases, those ilk are bad in making a living and are made to draw only the short end of the stick."

"..."

Accelerator remained silent, glaring at Tsuchimikado.

Yeah! applause and cheers enveloped them.

"Oyafune Monaka is probably appealing to grant suffrage to Academy City's children. As majority of this town's inhabitants are children, suffrage is non-existent. And adults can't voice complaints on policies that the top has decided. Even if the top says starting tomorrow the consumption tax has increased to 30%, they can't put up a place to voice their objections. And so she's saying she wants that conferred. Hahah, an easy-to-understand [pain in the ass], right?"

Tsuchimikado's tone was light.

"If, for example, the children's suffrage is approved, even the [war] might be

stopped."

"You're crazy, I doubt that kind of stuff would go through that easy. It may be for peace but it ain't practical. Even they don't understand the word 'violence' at all."

"That was at the start for even racial and gender barriers. It does not involve only especially influential persons taking them on by themselves. Of course it's a great achievement for one to lead many people, but history is definitely changed properly because above all, the awareness of people convinced on their own that [they themselves are powerless] was changed, and great numbers of people acted."

At Tsuchimikado's words, Accelerator again scanned the plaza.

At the plaza where many of the youth gather whether or not it was a holiday.

Tsuchimikado softly laughed and said,

"I don't know what you believe in, but I think Oyafune Monaka is worth protecting. And so I put my life on the line. She doesn't tell me to come follow her, but I don't recall being stopped by that."

Shit, Accelerator tut-tut'd.

As he leaned on his cane and stepped on ahead,

"What a pain. Let's quickly smash up this shitty bastard of a sniper!"

Part 9

Accelerator and Tsuchimikado were standing about 100m from the onstage Oyafune Monaka. They should be approaching her closer as planned, but considering the possibility of mobility loss in the crowd of people, they couldn't

say it was a viable plan.

Using a GPS map from cell phone, they ascertained their locations.

"There are about thirty-two possible sniping positions. But because there's a stainless-steel board at the back of the stage, it's virtually a blind spot at the back for 180 degrees. In other words,"

"There are 15 places at the front covering 180 degrees. We smash them one by one and perhaps we'll stop the sniper!"

"...Sunazara Chimitsu, already into sniping condition, may not necessarily be into waiting leisurely,"

Tsuchimikado looked around the surroundings as he said that.

He was not looking at a gently smiling onstage Oyafune, and he was not listening to her voice or the children's applause. He confirmed a special vehicle stopping just off from the plaza. On top of the crane-like vehicle, a machine resembling a gigantic electric fan was installed.

"For now, it seems there's the anti-sniper Wind Defense in place."

"Hmm?"

"You probably know that sniping is easily affected by wind. That equipment deliberately creates gusts around the VIP, throwing off the trajectories. About four of them are used, creating wind swirls that surround the assembly area. Since they're third generation, they use random numbers to generate random air currents,"

Tsuchimikado was saying such, but Accelerator was preoccupied with something else.

He turned his head to the side, looking towards the vicinity of the confusion, when suddenly he *zip!* hid himself in the crowd.

Tsuchimikado shifted his gaze there, and in a spot not far from them, a young girl about 10-years-old and a middleschool girl with lots of flower decorations attached to her head were there, hands together and walking.

"'And so Misaka is looking for a lost child,' says Misaka as Misaka tries to present the action pointer!"

"Ha, uh, well, lost child?"

"'You may not understand it well, but Misaka believes he's around here,' says Misaka as Misaka tries to state the prediction. 'Somehow the area on the head is tingling,' says Misaka as Misaka tries to include intuitive supplementary info."

"Sigh... as I thought, that's one out-of-this-world ahoge, you know."

This is not an ahoge!! On hearing that scream, Accelerator reflexively did a facepalm.

"(...What's with that brat showing up in a situation like this!? That 'God' bastard sure is messing around!!)"

"(...Hahaha, that's life for you,)"

Tsuchimikado suitably said. But upon noticing a young girl in maid outfit mixing among the crowd, he too was troubled at the same time.

Let's look out for stray bullets flying onto strange places! As the pair strangely agreed on a single opinion,

"I didn't think that there's a Wind Defense to throw off the aim at the target. Things sure are complicated now."

"The side of the vehicle says that it's an air-purifier."

"That's right. It operates in the same way as the air cleaners used by the school staff smokers, but the sizes are quite a different story."

Tsuchimikado said, seemingly proud; however, Accelerator's eyes were cold.

He said,

"...That's one nice speech, but they ain't movin'!"

"HA!?"

A shocked Tsuchimikado confirmed it in hot haste — sure enough, the gigantic electric fan blades aboard the large car had abruptly stopped.

"They should have been running since a while back..."

It couldn't be a blunder by the VIP bodyguards.

In hearing range of Tsuchimikado who was thinking of that, a strange *ping!* sound resounded, adding to the chaos of the surrounding noise.

The sound of a metallic pot being dented.

"—"

Accelerator and Tsuchimikado both focused on the source of the sound at the same time.

There was a special car Wind Defense parked in a different location. As they thought, those gigantic blades were not moving. And, on the surrounding cylindrical outer wall which surrounds the electric fan, thumb-sized holes had opened up.

"Dammit, it's his doing. — Sunazara Chimitsu,"

Accelerator said.

"That bastard... He's gonna aim and shoot for an undefended Oyafune after taking those interfering Wind Defense out of action!!"

"Shit!!"

Tsuchimikado tut-tut'd, then tried to get closer to Oyafune by plunging into the crowd. But with so many people, it seemed he couldn't move forward as much as he would like. And during that time, the pinging, metal-hitting sounds occurred in succession. Those may be invisible for Accelerator, but perhaps they were destroying absolutely every Wind Defense equipment located elsewhere.

(Dammit. Because the magnetic sniper rifle doesn't use raw gunpowder, nobody realized that the equipment had been shot!)

Already the artificial defensive gusts were gone.

Tsuchimikado was trying to relay the danger to Oyafune Monaka, but it was

unlikely he had time.

"Tch!"

Onstage, Oyafune Monaka continued her speech. The surrounding bodyguards were standing by, unaware of the danger.

At this rate it would be a checkmate.

"What a pain!!"

Part 10

The sniper, Sunazara Chimitsu, had set up his magnetic sniping rifle.

He was in a certain hotel room. Which he intruded into without doing any check-in, releasing the electronic lock at will. After he defeated the window glass security, he cut out a square hole, then put out the magnetic sniping rifle's muzzle.

It was called a magnetic sniping rifle — but its form was quite different from existing rifles; it looked like steel boxes bolted onto a steel tube that was as fat as a human ankle. The barrel, supported by a tripod, was one strong solenoid coil.

Near Sunazara was a suitcase. First, it served as storage for the disassembled magnetic sniping rifle; second, it was a gigantic battery for the same rifle.

"..."

The range was about 700 meters.

All of the obstructing Wind Defense equipment had already been destroyed.

Oyafune Monaka, far-off and onstage, felt so close that he could hold her when

he looked through the scope.

Right through her,

Sunazara Chimitsu naturally thought, and then relaxingly pulled the trigger.

At that instant.

BOOOM!!

Suddenly, a corner of the concert hall front plaza exploded, and flames with black smoke rose from there.

The target, having taken the blast wave, reflexively flinched her body. Thanks to her irregular action, Sunazara's bullet didn't strike Oyafune Monaka.

"What the...?"

Sunazara frowned at the all-too-good timing. Even during that time, the gorilla-sized bodyguards surrounded Oyafune and took her downstage.

Sunazara had work to do.

He continued to pull the trigger, but the steel bullet struck one of the guards sticking to Oyafune. The guard's body was noisily knocked off, but upon looking at places where there was no bleeding, there was probably bulletproof equipment inserted to serve as a shield.

The remaining guards' arrangement changed. Oyafune's body was completely hidden behind the brawny men.

"For now it's not the right time."

Long-range sniping was delicate. If, for example, he used bullets that could go at the speed of sound and fired from 700 meters, the bullets would take close to two seconds from leaving the barrel until they struck the target. It was not so bad for clueless and standstill targets; but accurately shooting target's vitals that was running away while being defended by multiple guards was difficult.

Sunazara Chimitsu thought for a moment, then decided this time to simply

retreat.

"Even so, what blew up?"

Confirming with his scope, the black smoke was coming from the special car with its Wind Defense. Sunazara's expression changed into that of increasing suspicion. He had rained them with bullets to stop their functions, but he had no intention of hitting them to blow them up.

"..."

At that time, Sunazara's held his breath for a moment.

He was very near the ablaze special car. A white-haired person, on-site and merging casually into the scenery, stared right at him. He was supported by a cane, and flames and black smoke were behind him.

"I see."

Sunazara took his eyes off the scope, and immediately got into disassembling his magnetic sniping rifle. As the pieces were stored one by one into the suitcase, he silently muttered,

"I'll remember that face."

Part 11

By the time Tsuchimikado Motoharu raided the hotel room, there was no one there.

However, there was an unnatural square cut out from a window corner.

"Damn!"

Tsuchimikado took out his cell phone, and contacted Accelerator.

"Recovery failed. However, with Sunazara having got away from here, the probability of him continuing his sniping is low. For now, suspend Oyafune's address and have it transferred after security measures are set up again."

["I've got word from Musujime,"]

Accelerator said from the other side of the telephone.

["It looks like she's read out the IC chips from the fourth pile of paper money that failed to read out before. The contents are, as expected, the names of those who employed the sniper Sunazara Chimitsu."]

"And who are they?"

Tsuchimikado inquired, then Accelerator answered with a seemingly depressed voice,

["—School."]

"What?"

["Just like our Group...it's an organization hidden in Academy City's underworld."]

Between the lines 1

A man was loitering at an open café at high noon.

Various meals were being lined up at the guest-packed tables, but there was none of that at that man's table. Not even a single cup of coffee was found; only large quantities of photocopy sheets were disorderly placed there.

The man, with both hands jammed into the pockets of the lab gown he was wearing, was poring over the photocopy sheets spread out onto the table. Printed onto several bundles of paper were the AIM diffusion energy field data of espers that were in the Bank.

A young girl, clad in a crimson school uniform and sitting opposite him, watched him suspiciously.

"What did you find from seeing those?"

"Various things,"

The man answered, not even looking up.

"**A magician like you** may not understand it, but various information is written in here. It's simply not only energy that emanates weakly from espers. It is the unconscious interference against our reality... through investigation of the variety and strength of that multifaceted energy, we are able to even find the heart of an esper."

"Unconscious—interference...?"

The girl muttered, emotionless.

"If AIM diffusion field analysis pushes forward, it becomes data after highlighting the contours of the Personal Reality a man possesses and investigates his personality and behavioral tendencies. I believe it will be a quite practical and easy-to-understand data, more so than a psychological profile."

A silver-colored monster was waiting beside the seat where the man was seated.

It was a four-legged walking monster created from titanium alloy and synthetic resins. Its basic form was close to the carnivorous cat family, but its nose was unnaturally long like that of an elephant. Because the metallic monster had a guide robot dog walking program installed, it was surprisingly flexible in adapting itself to human society.

That monster opened its mouth.

["Professor."]

It was a lad's accented voice, and it didn't seem to be synthesized.

["It seems Group and School have made their moves."]

The man named Professor shifted his staring eyes, and looked at the man-made monster.

Its conversational function was not because of the robot's AI. It was only another person at a different location talking through wireless networks. In short, it was better to think of it as a phone made a bit complicated.

"Have they made contact?"

["No. It appears Group has failed at capturing them. Currently it's unknown whether or not they can catch on to School's shadow."]

Hm, the Professor exhaled only once and,

"In any case, **the others,** too, have probably started to move."

They were the unit under the direct control of Aleister, the chairman of the general board of directors.

Whether it was for good or bad, they moved as that [person's] hands and feet. They were a small organization expected to do only just that.

"From the start, **organizations just like us** have reasons for their complex behavior, but due to the various powers they were repressed by the top, and were subject to control. However, because of the riots that arose along with the 0930 Incident, the majority of the powered suits were sent out for the mop-up at Avignon. That force is, according to the man on the 'Telephone', one convenient set of limbs. This was the big opportunity, according to him, since the suits cannot be used freely,"

The Professor said all of that with a drawling tone.

"Soon there will be an opportune time, right?"

A voice was suddenly heard right behind the crimson-uniformed girl.

Someone was standing there, where there had been no one up until now. A young lad entirely clad in a greatly inflated down jacket.

It totally felt like he had come out from thin air.

"It seems so,"

The Professor buoyantly said, while reaching out and lightly stroking the monster's head. He was not surprised at the lad showing up. The girl seating opposite looked at the exchange, seemingly uninterested.

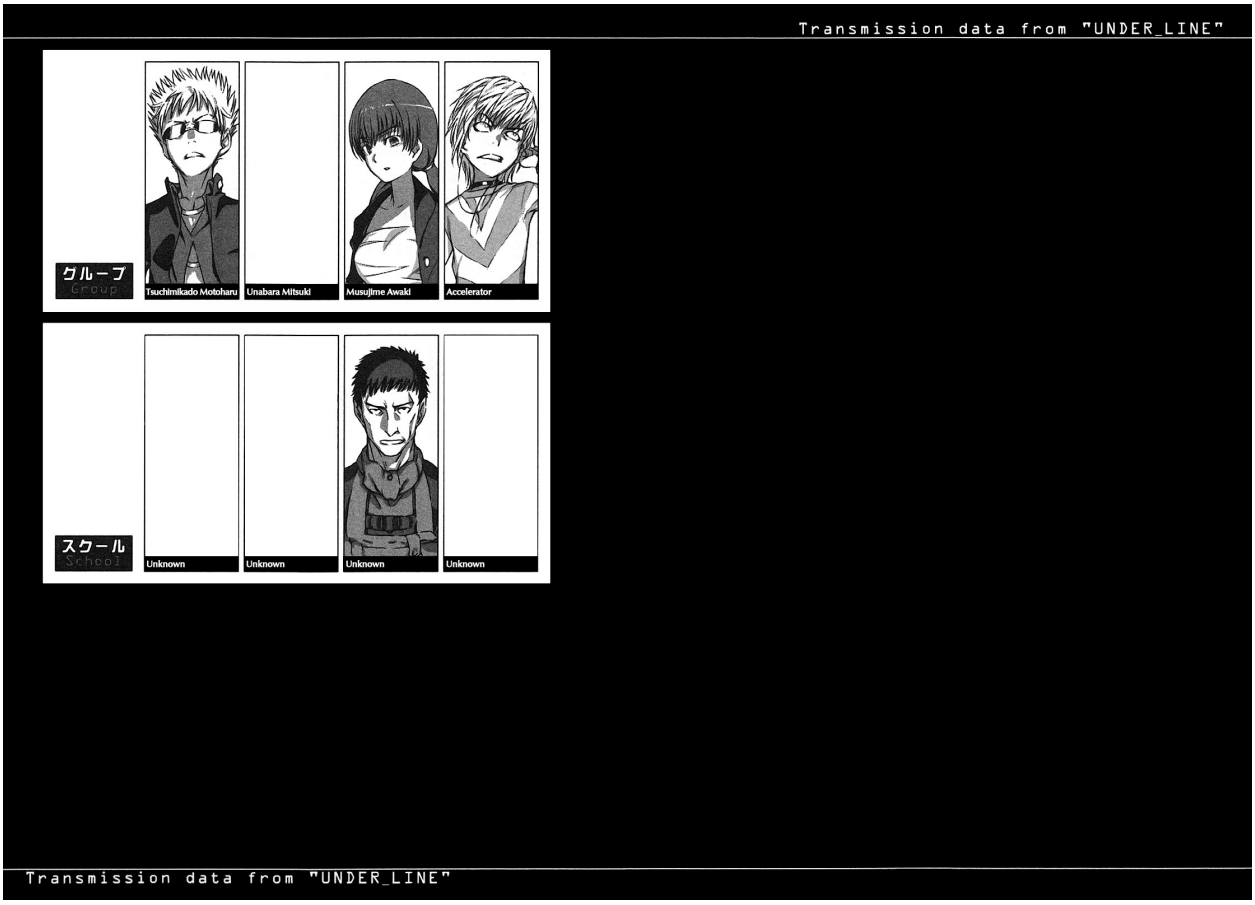
She inquired with a doubtful expression,

"Why did you correctly predict 'their' movements? Even though the information from above might be incorrect?"

"It's because the top brass holds the technology to make that possible."

And, the hand of the Professor that was stroking the monster stopped.

The Professor was gazing at the opposite sidewalk which was enclosing the roadway along with this open café. A young girl clad in what was commonly referred to as maid clothing was passing by. But the Professor was not looking at the girl. He was looking at the drum can-type cleaning robot that the girl clad in maid clothes was kneel-sitting on top of. He was looking at the robot that was very smoothly passing by.



The Professor nodded at once.

He was seriously impressed.

"That idea hadn't come up."

["Professor, please refrain from thinking of strange ideas."]

Notes

1. ↑ An ahoge is a lock of hair protruding from the top of one's head.

Chapter 2: The People Who Have Slowly Begun to Move. *Hikoboshi_II.*

Part 1

Accelerator, Tsuchimikado Motoharu, and Musujime Awaki were inside a camper-van driven by one of the grunts.

It was lunch time.

Fast-food was lined up onto a small table that was bolted onto the floor. Accelerator and Tsuchimikado were each eating their own respective food that they had bought — hot fried chicken for Accelerator, and a huge hamburger for Tsuchimikado. Even at lunchtime they didn't get along well.

Meanwhile, Musujime Awaki was looking at them while eating her high-quality brand salad delivered straight from the Mediterranean.

"...You two are killing yourselves fast, you know."

"Nya. Eating only green leafy veggies isn't too healthy, ~nya. You can maintain a healthy body for sure by eating meat and veggies in moderation, right? To be biased in either meat or vegetables isn't right."

"Hah!? You say eating meat and then dying is not a blessing? This is what you call doing what you want until you're dead!"

As Accelerator licked off the oil sticking to his thumb, Musujime continued,

"So, you got nothing about them, School."

"I tried accessing the Bank, but nothing came up apart from the name. It seems

its secrecy level's the same as ours. Only Group and School were recorded."

However, Musujime cut in,

"...When I tried to dig in, multiple organization names like those came out."

"There are more than two of them?"

Tsuchimikado chomped down on the hamburger, and quickly grabbed the meat forced out from the other side of the burger.

"Group, School, Item, Member, and Block... from what I found out, there's five of us. Little is known about the rest, but I felt they're perhaps the same as us — **unofficial units created by putting few persons together**."

While Musujime was counting with her fingers,

"School is the one who attempted to snipe Oyafune Monaka. If that's the case, are they the ones involved with the destruction of Management's apartment and the attack on the paddy wagon? Unabara Mitsuki is also concealing himself under them because of those."

"Who knows. However, I wish he'd make signs that he's spying on School. He might think of them as enemies and carelessly, utterly crush them."

Accelerator was listening to Tsuchimikado and Musujime's discussions, all the while sipping on his can of coffee.

...Even so, why did this so-called School try to assassinate Oyafune Monaka?

Part 2

(They just do whatever they want, don’t they?) thought Hamazura Shiage.

It was noon and they were at a family restaurant in District 7, but the girl known as Mugino Shizuri was sitting at one of the tables eating a convenience store

bento she had bought elsewhere and she wasn't even trying to hide it. He felt sorry for the short waitress that was nervously standing nearby.

"Huh? This salmon bento seems different from the one from yesterday. Huh?"

Even inside the restaurant, she was wearing a bright autumny short sleeved coat. She crossed her stocking-covered legs as she sat next to the window and muttered those words of puzzlement. Hamazura responded silently in his heart with, "It's the same damn thing as yesterday."

Everyone at that table was rather eccentric.

"In the end, I'm getting kind of tired of canned mackerel. Now curry. Curry would be awesome."

The blonde-haired blue-eyed high school girl known as Frenda sitting next to Mugino said this while poking at the contents of a can, but she must not have been good at using a can opener because there was something that looked like PVC tape stuck around the can and the top had been burned off by an explosive with an electrical fuse stuck in it. Hamazura thought it was a tool usually used for blowing the locks off of doors.

Kinuhata Saiai, the girl sitting across from Frenda, was an obedient-looking girl of about 12 wearing a fluffy knit dress. She was paying no heed to the actions of the other eccentric girls (not because she had the good sense to ignore them or because she was broad-minded; that was just the type of eccentric person she was) and looking through some movie pamphlets.

"An ultra-problematic C-movie by the Hong Kong Red Dragon Film Company… It sounds like you'll be on the edge of your seat for more reasons than one. I'm super interested. I have to check that one out. What do you think, Takitsubo-san?"

Kinuhata was speaking to a lethargic girl sitting next to her named Takitsubo Rikou. She wasn't touching her food and was sluggishly sitting in the sofa-style seat with her arms and legs sprawled out limply while her gaze aimlessly wandered around.

"…A signal is coming from south-southwest…"

These girls were Item.

Item was one of Academy City's unofficial organizations and its primary duty was to stop the "upper classes", including the board of directors, from getting out of hand. There were only 4 of them, but they could influence what direction the city and the science side as a whole took. They were a unit that had the same level of secrecy as Group and School.

Hamazura Shiage was not a proper member of Item.

He was part of its subordinate organization and all the odd jobs and the driving were left to him.

Before, he had briefly been the leader of the armed organization of back alley Level 0s, Skill-Out, but their plan had failed and they had taken a devastating amount of damage. That had put an end to his life of standing above others. Now he spent every day doing subordinate work in the dark side of Academy City.

(Y'know…)

There was something that had been bothering Hamazura ever since he had been assigned here.

(Being the only guy in a group of girls is kind of awkward.)

The table was made for 6 people, so Hamazura sat at the seat closest to the aisle. He had been given drink bar duty.

"So," Mugino Shizuri began a conversation after having finished eating her usual salmon bento. "Before noon, someone attempted to snipe Oyafune Monaka, one of the board of directors. They want us to take action in regard to that case."

"Hey, in the end, I don't have that information."

Frenda made that simple objection and Mugino stopped moving for a second saying, "Mh?"

Then the girl in the short sleeved coat looked over to Hamazura.

“Hamazura. Send the details of the incident to everyone’s cell phones.”

“Okay, okay.” was Hamazura’s halfhearted response.

He couldn’t complain about what he was instructed to do. This was his job. He took out his cell phone and sent the data saved there to the members of Item other than Mugino.

“Hmm.”

All of Item checked the information on their phones.

And what appeared on their screens was a porn video he had downloaded from the internet.

All four Item members immediately snapped their cell phones shut. When they looked at him with scornful eyes, the door of his heart slammed shut. He shut his heart up tight and sent his heart’s elevator down to take refuge in his heart’s nuclear shelter.

“No, wait!! Let me redo that! This was some kind of mistake!!”

Hamazura Shiage was once the leader of over 100 Skill-Out delinquents and now he was having to explain himself in a loud voice.

But the 4 members of Item responded by…

“Hamazura…”

“In the end, you’re disgusting, Hamazura.”

“So bunny girls are a super hit with you, Hamazura?”

“Don’t worry, Hamazura. I’m rooting for you.”

Hamazura trembled slightly at their mild words and made sure he sent the information on the attempted sniping of Oyafune Monaka to them.

When he did, Kinuhata spoke in surprise.

“Oh, this is that super plan of School’s. But I was super sure we had taken out their assassination sniper three days ago…”

“They probably just hired a new one. Well, I suppose this means they ignored our ‘warning’.”

“In the end, didn’t we debate about why they were targeting Oyafune Monaka back then, too?” Frenda stabbed into the contents of her mackerel can with a fork as she spoke. “Oyafune’s on the board of directors, but in the end she’s useless. She doesn’t have much influence, so there’s no value in killing her. And yet…”

“School went out of the way to replace their lost sniper and they ignored our ‘warning’ in order to assassinate Oyafune,” Takitsubo added to what Frenda had said absentmindedly.

Mugino nodded casually.

“There’s no value in killing Oyafune Monaka. And yet School forced themselves to snipe her on schedule knowing full well we had our eyes on them. Why would they do that? …Yes, Hamazura-kun!”

Hamazura jumped in surprise at her words.

(Hah!? Why did she bring me into the conversation as if she wants me to say something interesting!? Don't focus on me in a situation like this!!)

"U-um, well!! Wait a second! It's on the tip of my tongue. Just give me a bit and I'll have it!!"

He gave a nice energetic answer, but didn't actually say anything in it.

And the 4 members of Item responded by…

"C'mon, Hamazura…"

"In the end, it's really disgusts me how flustered you are."

"There are a super lot of different types of disgusting, but you're the worst kind, Hamazura."

"Don't worry, Hamazura. I'm rooting for you even when everyone's calling you disgusting."

The girls sighed in disappointment. Hamazura the Level 0 kneeled down on the ground and stopped moving.

Mugino ignored him and spoke.

"Well, as we said, there's no value in assassinating Oyafune Monaka. There's no denying that. And yet School still chose her as their target. So maybe they chose Oyafune as their target *because* there's no value in killing her."

"Because there's no value in it? I super don't understand."

"Oh, you know. Maybe School didn't care who it was. Maybe as long as it caused a disturbance, they wanted a VIP whose death wouldn't have much of an effect. In other words, they chose the VIP with the least security." Mugino sounded like she was enjoying this. "Other VIPs…well, let's just think about the board of directors. No other member was making an outdoor speech around this time. And that bastard Shiokishi wears a powered suit 24/7. There was no way they could successfully snipe someone like that, so I'm thinking they chose

someone easier to target. And, frankly, Oyafune Monaka had fairly lax security."

"…In the end, I feel sorry for Oyafune."

"If I'm right, what was School after? This is why a system to ensure the safety of VIPs is important."

Mugino puffed up her obviously large chest as she spoke.

"Starting with the 12 members of the board of directors, there are a lot of people and organizations recognized as VIPs in Academy City. Their security is better than the usual security and, when their lives are in danger, people are called in from all sorts of places. The roads their ambulances need to travel on are blocked off and big-shots from various medical industries gather at the hospital for them."

"In other words," Mugino paused for a second, "what do you think would happen if someone attempted to assassinate a VIP?"

"A lot of people would be called in to protect the facility where they would undergo treatment. Special researchers and equipment, anything necessary, would be brought in. Ah, hahhh. It looks like School wants to do something amid all that confusion."

"What a boring method," Kinuhata added.

"It was true they could create an 'opening', but it lacked certainty. Calling in more security would have little effect on District 23, or the 'windowless building'. All this would do would change their possible targets from 'facilities that could be attacked' to 'facilities that were temporarily raised to an attackable level'."

"It could be some kind of insurance. If School got serious, they could break into most facilities."

"But," Mugino added, "in order to carry out that insurance, they had to get a new sniper in a hurry and carry out their plan of assassinating Oyafune Monaka. They must have been pretty high strung getting everything in order."

"So, in the end, Oyafune Monaka was just a bit of security and School is still

planning on attacking their real target wherever or whoever it may be?”

“Yes,” Mugino quickly nodded.

Hamazura timidly spoke up.

“…Wait. So was that really an ‘attempted’ assassination?”

“It probably didn’t really matter. Even if Oyafune died, it would take a lot of manpower to perform CPR, do an autopsy, and analyze her body. She is the very highest of VIPs as one of the 12 members of the board of directors, after all. They would use all of Academy City’s mysterious technology to deal with it.”

“Uegh,” Hamazura responded in disgust.

Mugino continued on as if he had never spoken.

“We need to see what facilities have insufficient security due to the attempted assassination of Oyafune Monaka. …No. That’s not enough. We also need to see what would have changed had the assassination been successful. School must have been creating a situation where they could move whether the sniper succeeded or failed. So there should be a facility that has its security reduced in both situations. And that’s most likely where School will show up next.”

Mugino Shizuri forcefully stood up from her seat.

She spoke to Hamazura without ever looking over towards him.

“Hamazura, go find a car for us. It looks like we’re going to need to head out soon.”

It pissed Hamazura off how self-importantly she said that, but he couldn’t object.

He was just here to do subordinate work.

“Damn it. I was once the leader of over 100 Skill-Out members…”

Those words accidently leaked out.

“That’s true. Your point?”

(…God damn it.)

This time he swore in his heart rather than out loud and left the family restaurant to go find a car.

Part 3

Unabara Mitsuki was in a multi-tenant building in District 10.

The building had a lot of empty space and he was in one of the rooms that no one was renting. It may have had to do with the fact that the Academy City's only juvenile hall was right outside the window.

There were a few dozen armed men in the small room and there were four boss class figures standing in a line. A business desk that had been left there by someone had their guns, laptops, disguise tools, and hand cream on it.

(…This certainly didn't go as planned.)

Currently, he was not "Unabara Mitsuki".

He had fought back one of the attackers and "borrowed" his face.

(He was pretty weak, so I never thought he would be one of the central figures of the organization...)

His plan had been to disguise himself as some small fry, find a good time to go run an errand or something, and then sneak away from the group, but it seemed the person he had defeated was one of the boss class members.

That meant sneaking away was going to be difficult. Everything he did stood out and the group moved with him wherever he went.

Because of this, he hadn't found a good opportunity to escape and had been forced to move from District 7 to District 10.

“What is it, Yamate?” asked a voice coming from next to him.

A tall woman was standing there. She was slender, but her body was covered in hard muscles. She looked less like she was tense and more like she had been carved from stone. At first glance, you could tell she worked in some kind of underworld business, but, from what he had heard, she had gone undercover into Anti-Skill’s headquarters.

After thinking about all that, Unabara thought back on what the muscular woman had said to him.

Yamate.

Apparently, that was his current name.

“It’s nothing.”

“Pull yourself together. The success of the plan depends on your power.”

Everything she said was very polite. It could sound like she was being kind or that she was looking down on him.

“School has begun moving,” said a large bear-like man. “We’re the ones that sent them the info on Management, but… Tch. Couldn’t they have waited just a bit longer to take action?”

“It looks like this isn’t going to be easy. Outwitting Academy City is hard. But that’s also why we can’t give up now.”

(…)

Unabara sorted out the information he had while listening to the woman.

It seemed this organization was called Block.

It seemed this organization had the same level of secrecy and authority as Group.

It seemed they were planning something, but another organization, School, had taken action on the same day before they could and that happened to get in their way.

In order to correct for that as much as possible, Block had covered for School with that explosion. That was how Unabara had gotten wrapped up in it all.

(And…)

Block had given up on dealing with the effects of what School had done and were now switching over to carrying out their plan.

(School and Block. This sounds like it's pretty complicated…)

Then the muscular woman spoke to the large bear-like man.

"What about you know who?"

"…Oh, the man on the phone? That won't be a problem. The guys in the powered suits that act for him are tied up dealing with the aftermath in Avignon. The man on the phone can't do much right now. He's in trouble. He usually passes on orders from farther up the chain, but once we start our rampage he'll probably take the blame and get executed. Also, Hound Dog and its leader Kihara Amata were destroyed in the 0930 Incident so they won't get in our way."

(Apparently, this organization has someone who gives them orders just like Group.)

However, it was unclear whether the person on the phone was one person or multiple people. Multiple people could be commanding a single organization or each organization could have someone in charge of them. It could even seem like it was multiple people while it was just one person artificially altering their voice. It was all unknown.

(Well, whether it's one person or multiple, it can't be too large a group. They seem too responsive to be a large group.)

Unabara pushed the issue of the voice on the phone aside. He concentrated on Block's conversation and started thinking about the structure of the organization.

(At the very least, they're clearly not acting on the orders of the upper classes of Academy City right now. What are they planning on doing while the powered suits are gone?)

Unabara glanced to the side. The men of Block's subordinate organization were standing there. They were helping out with an obvious rebellion, but…

(I wonder how many of them realize it.)

Even if the upper classes told them it was an emergency and ordered them to gather at Point A, in the city's underworld, that was quite often a lie. In this world that was complicated by assumed ulterior motives, no one took an order at face value. In the end, you trusted in and acted on what you saw for yourself. There was the information that could very well be a lie and Block that would shoot you to death if you turned your back on them. If you had to trust in one of the two, you would choose the latter. That was the way to stay alive.

(It's divine punishment really. They're always lying to their subordinates, so eventually the credibility of their information will drop.)

"Okay," the large bear-like man said as if he had gotten over something. "I won't let anyone delay this any longer. Let's get started. Enough with Block. I'm not going to keep working under those higher ups like this."

He didn't start moving after saying that. Instead, he surveyed the area.

Unabara asked a question.

"What is it?"

"Nothing. I just want to do the usual safety check first."

The large bear-like man smacked his large hands together as he spoke. At that signal, a gloomy girl calmly stepped forward.

"Tetsumou. …We need to use your Skill Polygraph. We need to make sure there isn't a traitor amongst us."

"Will do. Reading people's minds is all I'm good at."

(…!?)

Unabara Mitsuki thought the surprise was going to come out on his face.

He pretended to casually grab a bottle of hand cream that was on the business desk and looked around the area. With the four members of Block (Unabara included) and the subordinate organization, there were a few dozen people there. It would be bad if he was found out here.

“Oh, and let me say one thing. The second you refuse to be ‘read’, I’ll assume you’re a traitor. I like transparency.”

After the large man’s announcement, the girl called Tetsumou started grabbing the hands of her colleagues one by one. An inhuman, mechanical voice came from her mouth as she did.

“Saku Tatsuhiko. Age: 28. The leader of Block. His primary duty is to keep an eye on the level of cooperation from friendly institutions outside of Academy City.”

After the large bear-like man was the muscular woman.

“Teshio Megumi. Age: 25. A formal member of Block. As a member of Anti-Skill, she……!?”

Tetsumou’s expression suddenly became distorted. For an instant, a menacing atmosphere came over the area, but Teshio herself didn’t seem worried.

“…You don’t have to read that far. Why *that kid* has no parents and can’t speak isn’t an enjoyable past to see.”

Tetsumou shook her head and turned her gaze in Unabara’s direction.

That was when the bottle of hand cream Unabara was holding slipped.

“…Ah, sorry.”

The bottle rolled over towards a member of the subordinate organization. When Unabara reached out for it, the young man approached and handed over the bottle.

“While you’re up here, you can go ahead,” Unabara invited.

The young man had happened to step right in front of Tetsumou, so he

interrupted the order and held his hand out towards her. It seemed he wanted to get his check over with.

It happened when the two of them held hands.

“Gaaaaaaahhhhh!?”

The young man and Tetsumou’s hands burst into red flames. With a boom, blood flew through the air. A few fingers did as well. Tetsumou held her right hand, but the pain and blood loss was too much for her causing her to collapse onto the ground and stop moving.

The young man hurriedly reached over for the first aid kit, but the large bear-like man stopped him.

“What did you just do?”

“I don’t know. I have no idea what just happened!”

“What the hell did you do!?”

“I was a victim here, too!!”

Saku didn’t say anything more. He pulled his handgun from its holster, pressed the barrel between the young man’s eyes, and pulled the trigger.

“Wait. I didn’t do anyth-…!?”

The young man was completely dumbfounded, but a gunshot rang out.

The blood-covered young man fell to the ground.

Saku stared down at the red-stained corpse and spoke.

“…Well, at least we found him before we got started. What did he even do?”

“What do we do now? Do we continue?”

Saku shook his head at Unabara’s question. It didn’t look like Tetsumou was going to be of any more use.

“There’s no time to find a replacement. We’ll prepare a confirmation device later.”

He didn’t seem interested in Tetsumou and ordered some subordinate members to take care of the body.

(…)

Unabara glanced over at the body of the young man lying unmoving on the floor.

Before the young man had held hands with Tetsumou, he had handed the bottle of hand cream to Unabara. When he had, Unabara had gotten the cream on his palm on the young man’s hand. And a small amount of liquid explosive had been mixed into the cream.

Unabara rubbed some hand cream into his palm. This time, it had a chemical mixed in that would eliminate the liquid explosive.

(He may have been an enemy, but… No, I can’t have thoughts like that right now.)

Unabara didn’t let his thoughts show on his face and Saku spoke as if he had pulled himself together.

“Now then. How about we get started?”

There was a laptop in front of him.

Part 4

An electronic alarm rang out within the RV.

The members of Group had finished eating their lunches separately and were now discussing their plan for the upcoming investigation, but they were immediately cut off.

The flustered voice of the driver/operator came over the vehicle's speaker.

"E-emergency! I'm sending you the data now!!"

Accelerator and the others looked toward the speaker the voice was coming from.

A map of Academy City appeared on the screen that was on the wall separating the back living area from the driver's seat.

"District 5's Virus Isolation Center?"

"It's a facility where Academy City-made computer viruses are analyzed and antivirus software is made. …It seems someone's cracking it." Tsuchimikado said as he read the rows of characters that were continually appearing.

Even though they knew about this incident, they never once thought of contacting Anti-Skill and asking for help. An issue that could be resolved by normal people wouldn't find its way to Group. If Anti-Skill could solve everything, Group would never have been created.

Accelerator spoke as if he found this to be a pain in the ass.

"Do we really have to act on this? You said there were plenty of other organizations like Group. Can't we leave this to one of them?"

"We have different duties, so there's no guarantee they would act on this. And it's also highly likely that one of those organizations has betrayed Academy City. We have to go."

Tsuchimikado continued to speak.

"That Virus Isolation Center has a number of unanalyzed viruses and a number of experimental viruses purposefully created by Academy City researchers. If they got out…Well, there'd be a panic."

"How far 'out' do you mean?" said Musujime with a meaningful smile on her face.

There was a gap of 20 or 30 years between the scientific technology inside

Academy City and outside of it. The same went for viruses. An old generation virus for Academy City machines would be a completely unknown threat to machines “outside”. And if a brand new virus that not even Academy City’s antivirus software could handle was leaked “outside”…

“I’m pretty sure Academy City’s security focuses more on keeping things in than keeping things out. So there should be a facility for that.”

“…The External Connection Terminals.”

Academy City was detached from the normal internet and an Academy City-only network had been created. The external lines that connected to the internet all had to pass through an External Connection Terminal to make contact.

“There’s a terminal in the north, the east, the west, and the south, right?”

They heard a bit of static over the RV’s speaker. The driver/operator was forced to speak.

“The emergency cut off of the External Connection Terminals has begun. The north terminal in District 3 is cut off. The east terminal in District 12 is cut off. The south terminal in District 2 is cut off. …!? The west terminal in District 13 isn’t responding! I can’t confirm whether it has been cut off or not!!”

“Ha ha! Another easy to understand plan!!” Accelerator laughed after hearing that announcement.

Tsuchimikado gave a daring smile.

“Most likely, they’re luring us in. I don’t know who it is, but it seems they want to be scrapped.”

The RV started heading for District 13.

The driver’s anxious-sounding voice came over the speaker.

“Wh-what about the attempted assassination of Oyafune Monaka-san?”

“We’ll deal with it later.”

“In fact, it might be School that’s behind this as well.”

“Um…What about Unabara-san?”

“We were never planning on saving him.”

Part 5

Hamazura Shiage was losing his presence of mind over an electronic beeping in a back alley.

The sound was coming from the portable terminal in Mugino Shizuri’s pocket.

“Hey, should you really be ignoring that?”

“It’s fine, it’s fine. If I don’t deal with it, someone else will.”

Even so, the terminal continued to beep. It was so insistent that Mugino started trembling, forcibly grabbed it, and yelled into it as if she was trying to bite it.

“Shut the hell up, you damn idiot!! Can’t you tell I don’t feel like answering!?”

“It’s always like this with you! I’m not contacting you because I want to!!”

It wasn’t on speakerphone, but the sound easily reached Hamazura as he listened from the side. The speaker was the mysterious woman that always gave orders to Item.

“There’s an emergency at the District 5 Virus Isolation Center, so you need to go and deal with it!”

“Ehh?”

“No, not ‘Ehh?’! It’s always like that with you! The powered suit group is busy searching for the body of someone called ‘Terra of the Left’ in Avignon. So get moving!!”

“I’m busy now, so can we deal with this later?”

Mugino’s tone of voice made it extremely clear she didn’t want to do this.

“It’s always like this with you!” the woman on the phone yelled back. “As I’m sure you know, Item’s job is to eliminate and erase elements of unrest in Academy City. So do your job already!”

“Yeah, but…”

“And you killed School’s sniper before, right? You said Oyafune Monaka wasn’t going to be assassinated, right? It’s always like this with you! If what you said was true, then why did it turn out like this!? I thought that was over, so I reported that the level of danger had fallen… I’m the one who’s mad here, so shape up!!”

It was like she was yelling at a waitress who had gotten her order wrong.

“Damn it. That’s it… I’ll ask someone else to deal with the Virus Isolation Center, so write a report on the attempted assassination for me. And have it done ASAP.”

“Sorry, but that isn’t happening.”

“And why the hell not!?”

“Because we’re about to go kill all of those bastards in School.”

The complaining woman’s voice suddenly stopped.

“Umm, could you make sure you shoot each one of them at least 10 times for me?”

“…Okay, that was awkward. As our manager, aren’t you supposed to try and stop us?”

“Don’t worry, my underling. I’ve hated School for a long time. And everything that worries me should be eliminated from the Earth!!”

“Gah ha ha ha ha!!” the woman laughed like a military commander and then hung up.

As she put the portable terminal back in her pocket, Mugino's expression seemed to be asking if someone like that should really be the organization's manager. Then she looked around.

"Hey, Hamazura. Can you really get us a ride?"

"You sure make that sound casual… But I suppose I can."

As he spoke, Hamazura approached a passenger vehicle parked on the street. There was a fiberscope on a connector at the bottom of his cell phone that he used to send a small optical fiber thinner than soumen into the keyhole to check the arrangement of the pins. Hamazura used the image of the inside of the keyhole displayed on his phone to use a number of wires to unlock the door.

Hamazura got in the driver's seat and checked the engine keyhole below the steering wheel.

"Huh, that's a convenient skill," said Mugino with real admiration in her voice as she got in the passenger seat.

Kinuhata, Frenda, and Takitsubo got in the backseat. It was a four door car made for families much like the taxis in the area, but it did feel a bit cramped with 5 people in it.

"Where are we going?"

"Kirigaoka Girls Academy in District 18. There's a particle engineering lab near it. That's the only place where the uproar over Oyafune led to a bit of disorder with the private guards being called in and some equipment being transported. The security there is now fairly insufficient due to that. It's pretty easy to see the plan here."

"There was only one place? That is simple."

"Sorry, I forgot to mention that there were multiple places, but this was the only beneficial one."

"I see," responded Hamazura arbitrarily. "But particle engineering? If that really is School's target, what are they after?"

“Who knows. But it’s better than dealing with the whole Oyafune Monaka thing, right? So let’s head out and clean up this mess some other bastard’s left.”

“Hmm,” said Hamazura as he easily started the engine.

Takitsubo’s voice came from the backseat.

“Hamazura, do you have a license?”

“You don’t need a card to drive; you need the skills.”

After responding, Hamazura smoothly departed in the automatic transmission car.

Part 6

Accelerator and the others headed through District 7 in the RV.

Tsuchimikado looked worriedly at his watch.

“…It’ll be another 10 minutes before we reach District 13.”

The west terminal hadn’t been cut off, but they could cut off access by going there and physically disconnecting the cables. Strict officials that dealt with the budget didn’t like that kind of method, but there wasn’t much of a choice left.

But the electronic alarm began ringing again.

Tsuchimikado shouted in response.

“What is it this time!?”

“Cracking in District 23 confirmed! A satellite control center belonging to an aerospace engineering laboratory is undergoing an electronic attack!!”

(Satellite?) thought Accelerator as he frowned.

The only satellite launched by Academy City up there was a spy satellite officially referred to as a weather satellite. Using that, one could observe Academy City and the surrounding area in excellent detail, but…

“This just keeps getting more and more interesting. Hikoboshi II has a large caliber ground-attack laser installed on it, right?”

“This is bad. The cracking on the Virus Isolation Center is still going, isn’t it?” added Musujime.

“They’re trying to split up the counter-measure team. The Virus Isolation Center is just a decoy to prevent us from going full force, but that doesn’t mean we can just ignore it either. Being a decoy doesn’t change how much damage it could do.”

“Do you think this is School, too?”

“I have no idea. It could be some other organization.”

“Wh-what are you going to do!? Where do you want me to take you!?”

“Ha ha. Isn’t that obvious?”

As he spoke, Accelerator kicked the RV’s side door with the bottom of his foot.

He must have already flipped the electrode’s switch, because his vector transformation power caused the metal door to fly out onto the street.

Tsuchimikado yelled out at him.

“Accelerator!!”

“I don’t like dealing with some bastard’s decoy. I’m headed to District 23. I’ll stop the cracking by destroying the huge antenna that’s used to contact the satellite. You can deal with the odd jobs without me.”

After saying what he wanted to say, Accelerator jumped out of the car without hesitating.

His jump took him in an unnatural trajectory. He passed over the center divider

and landed in the passenger seat of a convertible driving the other direction. A normal person would have been crushed by the difference in speed, but it was no problem with the aid of some vectors.

The most flustered person was the driver of the convertible.

“Wah wah!? Wh-what? What!?”

“I’ll pay you for the gas and labor.”

The driver heard a small noise.

He could feel something pressed up against his cheek, but he couldn’t move his neck. However, he could see a black piece of metal that looked like a handgun in the rear-view mirror.

“Take me to District 23. And keep your eyes on the road.”

Part 7

(I’m bored.)

That’s what Hamazura Shiage was thinking while sitting in the driver’s seat of the stolen car while it was parked on the side of the street.

He was near Kirigaoka Girls Academy in District 18. About 100 meters in front of him was a square building. It was the particle engineering lab that School was attacking while Item intercepted them. A large fight must have developed between the two organizations.

Hamazura groaned while looking towards the building.

“Wow…About half the building’s been destroyed and there’s some kind of beam shooting out. That must be Mugino Shizuri. She’s going all out with her Level 5 powers as usual.”

The reinforced concrete building was collapsing in clouds of gray dust. Hamazura could feel the ground trembling even in the stolen car.

(Level 5, huh?)

The former leader of Skill-Out, Komaba Ritoku, had truly believed that they could defeat that kind of person.

Hamazura wondered if Skill-Out was still thinking of fighting now that it had lost its leader.

"…Tch."

He lightly tapped on the steering wheel out of boredom.

At any rate, someone like him who ran from Skill-Out and was now working for espers had no right to say anything about it.

He opened the driver's side door and stepped out in irritation.

Since he was supposed to have the car ready to go for Item at all times and the supervision of no parking zones had been strengthened recently, getting out of the car wasn't the best idea. But Hamazura wanted to cheer himself up.

It was a holiday, so there weren't very many people near Kirigaoka Girls Academy. Also, there were 3 sports cars parked in the parking lot.

Hamazura was surprised when he saw one of them.

(Ohhhh!? That's an '89 model Booster, isn't it!? This was called the emperor of 4-doors!! N-no, stealing a car that stands out this much is too risky but…Screw it, we're going home in a Booster!!)

Hamazura started taking his unlocking tools from his pocket while his breathing became slightly erratic in excitement and he imagined the low exhaust of that famous car that had moved the hearts of celebrities. He approached the high grade sports car that must have belonged to some adult with excellent taste.

"Hamazura!!"

“Yes!?”

Hamazura hurriedly stuck his tools in his pocket and turned around when he heard a woman’s voice from behind him.

A woman teacher wearing a green jersey was standing there.

Even in her jersey, the woman clearly had a nice figure. In fact, she was so beautiful it made you want to yell at her for wearing a jersey like that, but that wasn’t what mattered to Hamazura.

She was part of Skill-Out’s natural enemy, Anti-Skill.

He was pretty sure her name was Yomikawa Aiho.

“Huh? What are you doing here? I had heard you were taken in during the incident at Dangai University’s database center. So that wasn’t you? I’m glad to hear that.”

She spoke to him sociably, but they weren’t on particularly good terms and the good will only went in one direction. After all, why would he feel any good will towards the woman who had caught him on the streets at night and thrown him in jail on 14 separate occasions?

“Why the hell are you here, you old hag?”

“I would think that was obvious.”

As she spoke, Yomikawa pointed towards the particle engineering laboratory.

Hamazura brought his hand up to his forehead.

Item’s subordinate organization could conceal a lot of things, but it seemed not even they could perfectly hide a laboratory that was in the process of being destroyed.

Yomikawa put her hands on her hips and smiled at Hamazura.

“Y’know, I’m always hoping we’ll be able to rehabilitate you.”

“Hah? What are you talking abou-…?”

“Why are you bent over like you’re looking into that car’s keyhole? You’re not going to force me to bring out my handcuffs, are you?”

Hamazura’s shoulders jumped.

He couldn’t let himself get arrested here, so he shook his head back and forth.

“N-no! A baby!! There’s a baby trapped in the car!!”

“What!?” said Yomikawa as she hurriedly approached the car and pressed her hands against the glass as she tried to peer inside.

When she did, the car’s alarm went off.

The shrill noise just made Yomikawa more frantic and Hamazura whistled pretending not to be involved. That was when a station wagon driving at a reckless speed sped away from the crumbling particle engineering lab.

“!?”

The station wagon flew past Hamazura and Yomikawa just as Mugino Shizuri came running from the laboratory. She was dragging her fellow Item member, the airheaded Takitsubo Rikou, by the nape of her neck.

They jumped into the backseat of the 4-door car Hamazura had been in before.

“Hamazura!! Quit failing at hitting on that woman and get over here! We need to follow that station wagon!!”

“I’m not fucking hitting on her!!” Hamazura yelled back and ran back to the car.

It was too bad he couldn’t get the ’89 Booster, but he couldn’t exactly steal the thing right under Yomikawa’s nose.

He had jumped into the driver’s seat and started the engine when Yomikawa called out to him.

“Wait a second, Hamazura!! What’s with that car!?”

“Can’t you tell!? I got my license!!”

He came up with that really bad lie and stomped on the gas pedal more than was necessary because he just wanted to get away from Yomikawa as quickly as he could. The engine and the tires emitted an uncanny screech and the family car roared off leaving the jersey-wearing woman teacher behind.

After driving off, Hamazura realized something.

“H-hey. Where are Kinuhata and Frenda?”

“That isn’t enough to kill them. Right now, that station wagon comes first!!” responded Mugino in an irritated voice.

The edges of her short-sleeved coat were scorched black and her cheek was swollen as if it had been punched. Seeing those things in the rear-view mirror, Hamazura tried to imagine what had happened in that lab.

“How did this happen? Aren’t you #4?”

“They had a Level 5, too. This piece of shit named Kakine Teitoku. He’s #2.” Mugino responded sulkily. “But they didn’t get out of this unscathed. We took out a member of School. Although it didn’t seem like someone with any real power.”

She waved around a piece of mechanical headgear that must have been her prize for defeating that person. It would wrap 360 degrees around someone’s head like the rings of Saturn and had a number of plugs on it. The cords that came from the plugs were cut off partway like cut weeds. Hamazura didn’t know what the device was for, but the blood splattered on it scared him.

“So what are you going to do when we catch up to that station wagon?”

“Kick the asses of the people onboard and take back their cargo.”

“Their cargo?”

“The 'Tweezers'. It’s an attachment-type manipulator for microscopic object interference.”

“…I take it you’re not going to explain what that means.”

“Essentially, that’s what School is after!! You don’t need to understand. Just catch that station wagon!! Wait, can we even catch them with this car!?”

“Don’t worry.”

It wasn’t Hamazura that said that; it was Takitsubo.

She was sitting in the backseat with her arms and legs sprawled limply out.

“My AIM Stalker can track down the owner of any AIM diffusion field I’ve recorded. Even if they leave the solar system, I can search for them and find them.”

“See?” Hamazura arbitrarily added on. “With an excellent navigator like that, they won’t get away. The bigger question is what you’re going to do once we stop that station wa-…”

Hamazura’s words were cut off.

This was due to a giant mobile crane flying out from a side street.

“!?”

He didn’t have time to turn the wheel.

The monstrous mobile crane slammed into the center of the 4-door car Hamazura and the others were driving in. A terrible crushing noise rang in his brain. In response to the sensors, the airbag deployed from the steering wheel, but it wasn’t much use as they had been hit from the side.

Hamazura had been driving the car straight forward, but it was now moving to the side as if it was being pushed by the mobile crane.

They broke right through the guardrail, ran onto the sidewalk, and hit the wall of a building.

The 4-door car was completely immobilized between the yellow mobile crane and the concrete.

Whoever did this didn’t seem to care about causing a disturbance or damaging

the area.

It seemed they were intending to kill Hamazura and the others.

“…Ow…”

“Damn it… That was School. They really want that station wagon to get away. They’re trying to slow us down!!” Mugino snarled.

The mobile crane backed up about 10 meters. A girl of about 14 was sitting in the driver’s seat that was surrounded by safety glass. She was short and slender and was wearing a short dress with an open back. It was the kind of dress one would expect the women at a hostess club to wear.

Hamazura thought she was planning on running into them again, but he was wrong.

The girl operated a lever and the crane arm extended. It did not have a metal hook for picking things up on the end.

It had a giant metal ball a few meters across that was used for destroying buildings.

“Shit!!” Mugino yelled and opened the back door, but the car’s frame had been warped too much for the door to open.

Hamazura pulled a lever to fold down the passenger seat.

“We can get out through the windshield!! Hurry!!”

He smashed the cracked windshield and jumped out onto the hood of the car. Mugino and Takitsubo climbed over the passenger seat to get into the front seat.

That was when the wrecking ball came swinging like a pendulum.

The giant mass of metal came roaring towards them. Mugino escaped through the windshield onto the hood first and Hamazura hurriedly grabbed Takitsubo’s hand and pulled her out, but the wrecking ball slammed into the side of the car.

There was a loud crash.

The shock threw the three of them down from the hood onto the ground. Hamazura tried to raise his head, but Mugino grabbed the back of his head. He was pushed to the ground and a second later the car was enveloped in fire as it exploded. It was amazing they all survived.

The mobile crane's engine emitted a disconcerting noise.

It was continuing even when a number of onlookers had gathered after hearing the explosion.

Mugino Shizuri clicked her tongue.

"Let's split up."

"You aren't going to fight, Ms. Level 5?"

"I'm after the 'Tweezers' on that station wagon. I'm not going to waste time on small fries. …And *that crane girl's power is a troublesome one*."

As she spoke, Mugino crossed the road and entered a small pathway.

Takitsubo ran in a different direction.

Hamazura headed into an alley between buildings and ran at full speed, but he heard wet footsteps coming from behind him.

(Oh, shit! She came after *me*!!)

Hamazura's throat went dry as he ran. It had just been a short girl driving the mobile crane, but she was a member of School, the group that had fought evenly with Item. He had no idea what kind of power she had, but it was something that a Level 5 like Mugino had called "troublesome".

Hamazura continued to run away, started climbing up the metal emergency staircase on the side of one the buildings, and entered the building on an arbitrary floor.

The building seemed to be a student dorm.

He ran through a straight hallway and heard a door open behind him.

(She caught up to me…!?)

He turned around by reflex.

Sure enough, the short girl had entered through the same door he had. The girl in the showy dress held a ladies' handgun in her hand. Basically, that meant it had a small grip.

(I'm dead!?)

Hamazura smacked his palm against the wall.

He had pressed a nearby button and a steel shutter fell down like a guillotine. The shutter's purpose was to protect against out-of-control psychic powers. The girl's eyes widened slightly and she fired her gun at Hamazura.

Bang bang! Two gunshots rang out.

Hamazura instinctively shut his eyes, but, when he opened them, there were no holes in the steel shutter. Looking at the monitor next to the button on the wall, he saw the girl click her tongue and look down at her own gun.

Apparently, she didn't have the firepower to destroy the shutter.

(…So she can't get through to me no matter what she does.)

Relief ran through his body.

He made the world's stupidest expression, raised his hands, and shook his ass back and forth while yelling "Ee hee hee hee hee!!".

"…"

The girl in the dress saw this on the monitor on her side of the shutter, put her handgun back on her thigh, and reached around to her back.

What she pulled out from the back of her waist was a handgun with a barrel about as thick as a can of coffee.

It was a small 40mm grenade launcher.

“O-oh, fuck. That’ll kill me for sure, won’t it!?”

Hamazura hurriedly ran back along the hallway, but the girl mercilessly pulled the grenade launcher’s trigger.

The shutter exploded and blew off in Hamazura’s direction. He was hit by a blast of fragments and flew more than 5 meters down the hallway before landing.

“Gh…Gaaah!?”

He somehow managed to get back up and ran wobbling down the hallway balancing himself with a hand on the wall.

Ahead of him was a terrace, so it was basically a dead end.

It seemed there was no stairway or elevator on that end of the hallway.

There was a 3-story drop on the other end of the railing.

However, behind him was the unknown girl from School.

He didn’t have to think twice about that decision.

(I’m definitely going for the 3-story dive!! Taking a leap of will-power and guts is 100 times better than facing someone as strong as her! The weak have our own weak way of living!!)

“Ha ha!! Being a loser is the beeeeesssttt!!”

Hamazura laughed loudly while running, stepped up on the railing, and jumped off of the third floor.

He didn’t even look down before jumping.

With a pursuer, he hadn’t had time to check what was below and he thought he might be too afraid to jump if he actually saw what was down there.

But a 3-story drop was nothing to laugh at.

(Shit. I hope there’s something to cushion my fall down there!!)

Hamazura looked down at the ground for the first time while in midair and saw a young mother happily pushing a baby carriage.

As he flew through the blue sky, Hamazura Shiage's brain yelled "no" as loudly as it could.

"Gwooooooooohhhhh!?"

He was swinging his arms and legs around trying to get some distance between him and the carriage by air walking. Whether that had any effect or not, his large body landed about 15 cm to the side of the baby carriage.

A sharp pain ran from his heels to his ankles.

The young mother put her hand to her mouth in a refined expression of shock and the baby's eyes opened so wide it forgot to cry.

"U-um…Who are you?" said the young mother.

"I'm the kind of hero that falls from the sky. It's dangerous here, so get out of here, miss."

Hamazura gave a refreshing smile as he spoke and ran down a nearby alley.

Part 8

"Tch!!" The girl of about 14 wearing the showy dress put away her grenade launcher and her handgun, put her hands on the railing of the terrace, and looked down at the ground from the third floor.

The target she had been chasing who had made that idiotic expression was nowhere to be seen.

Only a baby carriage and a young mother were down below.

The girl pulled out her cell phone and called a School comrade.

“I lost my target. There’s only a baby, a mother, and a baby carriage around here. …Do you think it’s possible that man disguised himself as a baby, a mother, or a baby carriage?”

She was called an idiot and told to die in response, so she hung up and put her phone back in her pocket.

(I let my guard down because I thought he was nothing much. I should have just used my power from the beginning…)

She looked back down towards the ground looking annoyed, turned her back as if she had given up, and went back inside the student dorm to go find an elevator.

Part 9

The convertible Accelerator was riding in was headed for District 23.

He gave a sidelong glance towards the frightened man next to him and pulled his cell phone from his pocket.

After thinking for a second, he entered the three-digit number for Anti-Skill.

When he pressed the phone to his ear, he did not hear an operator from the Anti-Skill contact center. Instead he heard the “man on the phone” who gave instructions to Group.

“What are you trying to do?”

“I assumed you would cut in if I called that number. If you don’t like that I can use you like that, stop being so predictable.” responded Accelerator. “By the way, it seems things have changed. You people seem busy with School, so apparently you can’t control people just by talking with them on the phone. You haven’t talked to us directly so far today, because you’ve been too busy dealing with all that, right?”

“Do you really think that?”

“You’re trying to just smooth it over? Pathetic.”

Accelerator and the “man on the phone” remained silent for a moment.

Finally, Accelerator got to why he had called.

“Give me the information on the satellite being cracked, Hikoboshi II. What’s the output of the military laser equipped on it?”

“Oh, is that all you’re going to ask? You could always ask a more relevant question.”

“I don’t trust what you say enough to risk my life on it.”

“What a cruel thing to say,” the man’s voice responded. “Strictly speaking, the laser on Hikoboshi II is an optical bombing weapon that uses white light waves. And it is currently experimental not military. It heats its target up to about 4000 degrees, but white light waves have the power to destroy cell nuclei just like ultraviolet rays, so it can cause cancer quite quickly.”

(What a ridiculous toy.) thought Accelerator, but he said something else.

“…What’s the range of exposure?”

“Anywhere from a 5 meter radius to a 3 kilometer radius. Also, it cannot fire in quick succession. It can barely manage one shot in an hour. And the atmosphere randomly refracts the white light waves, so there is a slight margin of error in its accuracy.”

“I can’t tell you anything that’s still in the experimental stage though,” the man added lightly.

Accelerator hung up without saying anything more.

He sat in the passenger seat of the convertible thinking while staring at his phone in one hand and jabbing his handgun into the driver with his other.

(Burning down an area with a radius of 3 kilometer? What are they planning…?)

Then his phone started ringing.

He thought it was that man again, but he was wrong.

“This is…Accelerator-san, right? It’s Unabara.”

It was hard to understand him because it sounded like he was keeping his voice low or had his hand over the microphone or something.

“I’m in disguise right now, so speaking in this voice is dangerous. As such, I’d like to keep this brief.”

“Oh, so you’re speaking to me in secret behind School’s back? Sorry, but I’m not going to listen to a plea for help. I have to stop them from cracking the satellite. If you’re saying you can stop School, then I’ll listen.”

“I’m not with School.”

“Ah?”

“The one’s I’m with are the one’s cracking the satellite, but they’re Block not School.”

“…”

From what Unabara said, the organization known as Block was carrying out a plan on that day as well as School.

“What a pain. Then what about the sniper attack on Oyafune Monaka that School carried out?”

“Don’t ask me. …Wait, sniper attack?”

Unabara sounded puzzled, but then he returned to the subject at hand.

“Before this, they attacked the Virus Isolation Center and one of the External Connection Terminals, so Academy City’s network counter-measure team must be in a state of confusion. They’ll be done with the cracking in another…20 minutes. Then Hikoboshi II will have fallen into Block’s hands.”

“God damn it,” Accelerator swore. “Why hasn’t District 23 temporarily frozen

the satellite control center?”

“There are various reasons, but the main one is that the normal method of manually freezing it takes over an hour.”

When dealing with space, things cost a lot more, so even a temporary loss of connection could bring about major losses. Accelerator knew this, but it still pissed him off that they couldn’t just cut off the connection once it was known the satellite was being cracked.

“What is Block planning to do with Hikoboshi II?”

“My guess is that it has to do with the optical weapon on the satellite.”

“Are they trying to strike a deal?”

“No, they’re just going to attack.”

Accelerator clicked his tongue.

“What’s their target?”

“…District 13.”

(District 13?)

Accelerator frowned.

Tsuchimikado and Musujime were headed there to deal with the External Connection Terminal.

(Could they be trying to eliminate Group…?)

After thinking for a second, he decided that it wasn’t that. A large-scale action like taking control of a satellite lacked certainty. Just because they caused an incident didn’t guarantee that Group would head out to deal with it.

“But there aren’t any major facilities there other than the External Connection Terminal. It’s mostly a collection of kindergartens and elementary schools.”

“That’s their target,” responded Unabara in a low annoyed voice that made it

sound like he disliked having to explain things. “Of all the districts in Academy City, District 13 has the most kindergartens and elementary schools. If they attack there, most of the city’s youngest residents will be killed. And what do you think would happen then? …To put it bluntly, do you think any parent would want to send their children to a place where that had happened?”

“…”

“Academy City is a city of students. No matter how many residents it has, they will eventually graduate. Without new students, the city’s numbers will continue to fall until it can’t even function.”

“…So they’re trying to slowly kill the city over the course of the next decade?”

Since Academy City held a great amount of scientific technology, it would not collapse on the financial front so easily. However, that didn’t change the fact that an Academy City with no children would lose its reason to exist.

Accelerator thought for a second.

“Can you stop them there?”

“If I could, I wouldn’t have called.”

“Can we have the residents of District 13 evacuate?”

“If it caused a panic, it could be dangerous for the children in the district. And today is a holiday. The teachers may be able to gather all the students who are still in the dorms, but I don’t think they could do anything about the ones playing in the district.”

“You’re fucking useless. So I suppose I have no choice but to destroy the antenna that communicates with the satellite.”

“Please do. I will continue to gather information here and pass it on to you when I can.”

After saying that, Unabara hung up.

Accelerator put his phone back in his pocket and looked in the direction the

convertible was driving.

(So in another 20 minutes they'll have taken control of Hikoboshi II.)

The convertible would most likely reach District 23 in a little over 10 minutes.

There was no time to take things slowly.

"Hurry up. I have somewhere I need to be."

Once again, he pushed the gun against the driver and the convertible faithfully sped up.

Part 10

Uiharu Kazari and Last Order were standing on a train station platform in District 7. This was the first time Last Order had seen a train, so she had been wandering around dangerously. Uiharu had grabbed her hand to keep her from doing so.

(Really…Why do I have to deal with this?)

Uiharu had given Last Order the change from the taxi and handed her over to Anti-Skill, but Last Order must have used some special skill because, before Uiharu knew it, she had snuck away from the station and was wandering around the streets again. Uiharu had realized that the same thing would continue to happen if she kept trying to hand her over, so she decided to help Last Order find the person she was looking for.

(You know, I wonder what kind of power "Last Order" is.)

Uiharu couldn't imagine what that nickname meant just from hearing it. Some esper names were simple ones decided on by the schools like "Telekinesis" or "Electromaster" and some were decided on by the student like "Railgun". Uiharu was guessing that this girl's esper name was most likely one she had come up

with herself.

“Why isn’t the train coming? says Misaka as Misaka tilts her head in puzzlement.”

“It looks like a freight train is passing through. By the way, where do you think the person you’re looking for is?”

“Hmm. I have a feeling he’s approaching from that direction, says Misaka as Misaka wrinkles her brow while answering.”

It seemed like Last Order was using some kind of power to search for this person, but it didn’t seem to be very precise.

“I wonder if I can really find him like this, says Misaka as Misaka becomes slightly downhearted.”

“It’ll be okay.”

“Thanks for the extremely general words of encouragement, says Misaka as Misaka gives her thanks despite how general they were.”

“I’ll give you a present so some energy can return to your ahoge.”

“Ehh!? You can freely take the flowers off of your head!? says Misaka as Misaka reveals her surprise!!”

“Here. It’s a hibiscus which means 'Well, let’s give it a shot.' in the language of flowers.”

“And now you’re shamelessly declaring incorrect meanings of flowers, says Misaka as Misaka becomes very confused!!”

While Last Order continued to chatter on, Uiharu ignored her and smiled.

That was when a loud noise reached Uiharu’s ears. She looked over and couldn’t see anything, but it had apparently been the sound of the exhaust from a sports car that had driven by at high speed.

“Where are they headed at that speed? Anti-Skill needs to work harder to catch

those kinds of people.”

As Uiharu spoke, Last Order wrinkled her brow and started thinking about something.

Part 11

Hamazura Shiage ran out of the alley onto a major road.

He stopped there and surveyed the area while breathing heavily.

Some boys enjoying their day off looked at him in puzzlement, but he didn’t see any sign of his attacker. He wiped the sweat from his brow, bought some cold Oolong tea from a nearby vending machine, and finally relaxed while drinking it.

(W-well, I managed to survive… I wonder if Item is okay. Ah, damn it. I just want to abandon all this shit and go off on a journey somewhere.)

But his cell phone cruelly began to ring.

Hamazura groaned when he saw the display.

It was from Mugino Shizuri of Item.

“Yo. Since you answered, I guess you survived. And I’m assuming you didn’t screw up, get handcuffed, and had someone put the phone to your ear.”

“Yeah, I’m alive… I was the ‘lucky winner’, so I’m assuming you’re fine.”

“Good work with that. I had things a lot easier because of it. Sorry, but you need to come right back. You have some underling work to do.”

Hamazura made an unpleasant expression at the thought of work and Mugino continued.

Saying this didn’t bother her at all.

“I’ve got a body here I need you to dispose of.”

Part 12

The convertible Accelerator was riding in stopped near the terminal station in District 23.

He blankly handed some money to the young man in the driver’s seat and got out of the car.

This was the only station in District 23.

A lot of lines connected there, but the platform for freight trains was the closest one. Even though this was the final stop, the tracks continued on. The tracks connected to the switchyard where the trains were serviced and where trains with a large number of containers could unload.

Noticing that his cane was getting in the way, Accelerator moved around the circumference of the station and looked for the antenna. He was walking through the container storage area that was off limits to unauthorized people.

(I have a little less than 10 minutes. This is like the schedule of some famous musician.)

He turned his attention to the electrode around his neck.

(The antenna for the satellite is a few kilometers from here, but a normal car can’t go any farther than this.)

He had about 30 minutes of battery left. He wanted to avoid using it if at all possible, but he didn’t seem to have a choice here. Searching for a car now would be a pain and it would be faster to “run” using his vector transformation power anyway.

Thinking this, Accelerator moved his hand to the switch on the back of his neck. But…

“Oh. I can’t have you doing that.”

He heard a soft male voice come from directly behind him.

He hadn’t noticed anyone there.

“!!”

Accelerator quickly pulled out the handgun in his belt and turned around, but no one was there.

His body swayed slightly as he stood there with his modern cane.

He moved to push the electrode switch with the tip of the gun in his left hand, but…

“That’s your weakness, isn’t it?”

Someone grabbed his hand from behind.

“No matter how strong your power is, you can’t activate it without pressing that switch, hm?”

Before Accelerator could get his hand free, a heavy blow came to the side of his head. It wasn’t the feeling of being punched by a fist. It was a dull feeling that felt like being hit by a metal pipe or hammer.

He felt a liquid oozing from the side of his head.

“! Are you…from Block!?”

“No, no. I’m from Member not Block.”

A voice from behind.

Member.

One of the five organizations similar to Group and School.

(Fuck. If it isn’t one of these organizations, it’s another!!)

“It isn’t that I want the same thing they do. I just have to prevent that antenna for the satellite from being destroyed.”

Accelerator turned his head and looked back while swaying on his feet, but there was still no one there.

But he did not hesitate.

While still looking in the same direction, he swung his own leg directly backwards and hit the attacker with his foot. The shock freed his left hand and, without turning around, he shot 2 or 3 shots backwards.

“…!? Tch!!”

Sensing he had hit, Accelerator quickly flipped the switch for the electrode around his neck.

He switched it from normal mode to powered mode.

Then he forcefully turned around.

As before, no one was there.

But as he looked around he saw a man standing behind a railroad worker who had approached after hearing the gunshots.

The man had shallow bleeding injuries on his side and thighs. He was wearing a down jacket and the down was soaked red. He looked high-school aged and was pressing a Western-style saw against the railroad worker’s neck from behind.

Accelerator gave a scornful laugh.

“So you’re a teleportation-type esper who can only move behind other people. What a boring power. You can’t even be Level 4. And usually being able to teleport your own weight is enough to get you to Level 4.”

“…”

“You fucking loser. You can’t do the theoretical 11th dimensional calculations on

your own, so you compensate by basing your calculations around the locations of others. That power is wasted on you."

"…I don't want to hear that from someone who relies on an electrode. Enough talking. The Professor asked me to do this too, so I'm going to stop you here."

"A hostage? That guy isn't even any use as a shield. And I'm after the antenna not you."

"You won't abandon the hostage."

The attacker – Accelerator decided to call him Kill Point – laughed scornfully.

"If you would, I doubt you would have come here to stop Hikoboshi II. I can stop you with this guy's life. But if you really think he isn't enough, I can create an even greater sea of blood."

Kill Point pressed the saw against the young railroad worker's neck and the worker gave a slight yell.

"…You lack aesthetics," said Accelerator as he held up his gun. "You simply have none of the aesthetics of a villain."

"If you're planning on shooting me, you should stop. I think that gun's sight is horizontally off by quite a bit."

Thinking about it, Accelerator realized that it did feel different than usual.

When he had shot Kill Point behind him, Kill Point had most likely messed with the setting on the sight. Accelerator could fix the sight if he wanted to, but there was no time to perform maintenance during this tense situation.

Even if the sight was off by a bit, Accelerator was skilled enough to easily hit his target.

But that changed when the target was using a hostage as a shield.

There were problems that could be dealt with using intuition and there were one's that couldn't.

“I see. This certainly is an interesting situation.”

“Well? What will you do?”

“This.”

As he said that, Accelerator turned the gun towards his own temple.

Before Kill Point could think, Accelerator unhesitatingly pulled the trigger.

Bang!! A gunshot rang out.

“Gh…Ahhhhhhhh!?”

Kill Point’s body was knocked backwards.

A dark red hole had opened in his shoulder. He tried to brace himself, but he still collapsed onto the ground.

Accelerator had altered the vector of the bullet he had shot himself in the head with so that it headed towards Kill Point.

He motioned his handgun to the side telling the railroad worker to move out of the way.

The railroad worker fled to the side so hurriedly he almost fell and Accelerator aimed his gun forward again.

“Looks like the sight really is off.” He put his finger on the trigger. “But I can correct for that by altering its vector when it hits me. A gun sight is nothing compared to the accuracy of my power.”

“Kh…”

Kill Point continued to face Accelerator and looked around by moving only his eyes.

A look of scorn appeared on Accelerator’s face when he saw that.

“Excellent. I don’t give a fuck who you move behind; I’ll still blow your brains out. You can run wherever you want, but with my next move I *will* pulverize

you. Run, piggy. Let fear set in after what I told you sinks in.”

“…!!”

Kill Point’s throat went dry.

Accelerator ignored his expression.

“Now then. I’ll teach you one thing about the aesthetics you lack.”

A smile appeared on Accelerator’s lips as he spoke quietly.

“This is what a truly first-class villain is, you fucker.”

Bang bang!! Multiple gunshots rang out.

Kill Point resisted a bit, but he stopped moving before long.

Part 13

Hamazura Shiage was in a very large space.

The job that remained for him after having escaped the pursuer from School was to incinerate some unknown object.

He was in an old abandoned building that wasn’t used anymore. In the middle of the remnants of one of the building’s floors, a huge device sat as if enshrined. The container-sized mass of thick metal was an electric furnace normally used to dispose of lab animals. It used an enormous heat of approximately 3500 degrees to sterilize and destroy the animal corpses, and the various germs they may have.

“…How is this thing getting its power? I doubt plugging it into the wall would suffice,” Hamazura mumbled while looking at the large out-of-place device.

His job was simple.

He would open the metal cover that had a huge wheel on it like the door to a large vault, throw a black sleeping bag inside, close the metal cover again, and then operate the electric furnace. And it was preset, so all operating it involved was pressing the conspicuous red ignition button.

It was best not to think about what was in the bag.

Mugino Shizuri of Item had told him as much.

And Hamazura thought it was good advice.

A subordinate like Hamazura didn't think too much about what the secret organizations like Item and School did. He was only there because it was necessary in order to survive in the city.

(…)

But as he felt an oddly raw weight in the black bag and felt the soft texture of a thick synthetic cloth when he grabbed it, the face of someone he had never met appeared in the back of his mind. Hamazura tried to shake it away, then threw the bag into the furnace and both shut and locked the thick metal cover.

Now he only had to press the red button.

The electrically created 3500 degree heat would dispose of the body, destroy the genetic information, and turn a human into nothing but ash in no time.

Hamazura thought for a second about the person in the bag, but he still brought his thumb up to the button.

He tried not to think about anything at all and all expression left his face.

That scared him a bit and his fingertips began trembling. When they did, the bottom of his thumb pressed the red button without him meaning to.

The "disposal" began with a low rumbling noise.

Hamazura stared at it without saying a word and finally took a step or two back before sitting down on the dust-covered floor.

“…”

Who had been in that bag?

It may have been a subordinate just like him and it may have been a major esper. It wasn’t necessarily a kid and he couldn’t rule out the possibility that it was an adult. It was probably an enemy, but Mugino very well could have killed an ally who screwed up. He didn’t know the circumstances surrounding the person’s death and it even could have been someone completely unrelated who happened to get caught up in it all.

And it was all being burned away to nothing.

Inside the thick metal device, a human was turning into something completely different.

Once the person became “ash” and was no longer legally recognized as a “human”, they would have disappeared without a trace. They might be thrown into the automated kitchen waste device, churned up, and shipped off as fertilizer. Even if “ash” was found in the trash, it wouldn’t be treated as having been a person. A body that had lost all genetic information wouldn’t be acceptable as material evidence.

“Hamazura.”

Hamazura Shiage heard a voice call out to him from behind, but he still didn’t move for a bit.

The electric furnace emitted a high-pitched beeping and a symbol indicating the incineration was complete appeared on the monitor.

“Hamazura. What’s wrong?”

The person calling out to him from behind was Takitsubo Rikou of Item.

Her esper name was AIM Stalker.

Unlike Hamazura, she had a Level 4 power.

He would probably have gone down the wrong path with power like that, but he

was still quite envious.

“…What exactly is a human life?” Hamazura said while staring blankly towards the furnace.

It wasn’t the first time he had seen a corpse, but he still felt a great weight in his chest.

“Damn it. When did a Level 0 life become such a cheap thing…?”

He heard the girl’s voice call his name again.

He ignored her, got up, and opened the cover to the furnace in order to gather up the ash.

Hamazura Shiage’s job wasn’t over yet.

Part 14

Unabara Mitsuki was in a multi-tenant building in District 10.

The area he was in functioned as one of Block’s hideouts.

Currently, 3 members of Block and about a dozen fighters from the subordinate organization were gathered there. And Unabara Mitsuki had switched out with one of those main members.

“…Almost there now,” said Saku Tatsuhiko as he shook his large bear-like body.

A laptop computer was in front of him. It looked compact, but there was a cord stretching from it that led to what looked like an overfilled sandwich. It apparently had about 15 commercial CPUs spread out on it with liquid cooling tubes running between them.

Teshio, the muscular woman, looked at the screen and spoke to Saku.

“Did you do it?”

“More or less. Since I used the Virus Isolation Center as a dummy, District 23 was understaffed.” Saku moved his mouth without looking over to Teshio. “This is the first step towards saying goodbye to this shitty world where every little thing is permeated in the stench of Aleister.”

Saku wasn’t really paying attention to who was listening; he was mostly speaking to himself.

Even so, his words were powerful ones.

“This is only the first step. We’re still well off from the goal, but we’re on our way.”

“…”

Unabara casually looked over at the clock on the wall.

Block would have the satellite in a just a few more minutes.

Accelerator hadn’t contacted him, so he didn’t know whether the antenna had been destroyed yet or not. He turned his attention towards his pocket. He thought about the Spear of Tlahuizcalpantecuhtli he had there.

(…I could end this by destroying that computer, but I would never survive the aftermath.)

Sweat moistened his palms.

He couldn’t put off this decision.

But then Teshio Megumi spoke.

“It seems something happened in District 23. A number of Anti-Skills were taken out there. From the transmissions I was able to intercept, a rescue worker was surprised at the fact that none of the injuries were fatal.”

Everyone looked towards the speaking woman.

“Connecting the dots between the defeated Anti-Skills leads straight from the

terminal station to the antenna. At tremendous speed, too. Much faster than a normal person could manage on foot."

"What organization is behind it?" asked Saku. "It would have to be Member, right? It has to be those dogs of Aleister."

"No," said Teshio quickly. "It's Group. I remember that white hair. If I remember correctly, he's a Level 5 who has recently come to this world."

(…She recognizes him?)

Unabara found that odd, but figured it out quickly.

The functionality of what Teshio held in her hand was more like a small business terminal than a cell phone. And on its screen was a grainy image that looked like it had been taken from a great distance.

According to the numbers on the edge of the image, it had been magnified 4000 times. Most likely, a member of Block's subordinate organization who had been waiting outside District 23 had taken it.

The monitor showed Accelerator headed towards the antenna.

With his power, he could easily destroy the 25 meter-radius parabola.

And Block wasn't going to take it sitting down.

(Not good! …Actually, maybe this is fine. Even if they do have him, they can't accurately snipe him from that distance.)

"What do we do?" Teshio Megumi plainly asked for instructions

All eyes turned to Saku.

"That should be obvious."

Unabara felt tension run across his body as he heard that unworried voice.

They must have had some kind of counter-measure.

He speculated that they might have some kind of bomb set up near the antenna

that could detonated remotely, but the large bear-like man gave a different answer.

“We pray for his success.”

At first, Unabara Mitsuki didn’t understand.

But then his thoughts recovered.

(Oh, no… They’re after…!?)

“A frontal assault on District 23 would have been difficult with our powers. But this can’t happen without the antenna being destroyed first. So we had to get some help from a more skilled idiot.”

“Surprisingly, we may have overthought this one. The Level 5 has reached the antenna.”

“The higher ups watching over all this must have opened a path for him. That area is crawling with air force-related weapons. Normally, an unmanned attack of mostly HsAFH-11 Attack Helicopters would have gone in to intercept him. Although it doesn’t matter because that Level 5 could have easily defeated them.”

(Our attention was drawn towards the optical weapon equipped on it, but Hikoboshi II’s primary function is to provide surveillance of Academy City and the surrounding areas. Without the antenna, both the attack functionality and the surveillance functionality will be taken out!!)

Unabara thought about the cell phone in his pocket, but it would be extremely difficult to get away and contact someone at a time like this.

Teshio stared at Saku’s face.

“Are we really going to use the people waiting outside the outer wall of District 11?”

“People like them are perfect for a plan like this. What? You aren’t having second thoughts about getting unrelated people wrapped up in this, are you?”

The large man ended the now-unneeded cracking program on the laptop, turned off the machine, and tossed it over to the subordinate members.

“Let’s go. There are 5000 mercenaries waiting for us outside the walls.”

October 9th 1:29 PM.

A certain satellite lost functionality because the antenna that communicated with it was destroyed.

Academy City’s defense capabilities had greatly fallen due to its surveillance network in the sky being gone.

Between the Lines 2

The Level 5 esper and School member known as Kakine Teitoku was in District 4.

It was an area lined with a lot of restaurants even for Academy City, so there were a lot of facilities dealing with food. One of them was a refrigerated warehouse for meat. It currently had a station wagon hidden in it.

“There’s no sign of Item. Looks like we lost them for now.”

Kakine opened the back of the station wagon and checked on what was inside.

It wasn’t frozen meat; it was a large metal box about the size of a small closet.

“…So those are the ‘Tweezers’,” muttered the driver who was a member of School’s subordinate organization.

A smile appeared on Kakine’s lips.

“An attachment-type manipulator for microscopic object interference. Well,

simply put, it’s mechanical fingers that let you grab particles that are even smaller than atoms. Hence the name.”

All matter in the world was created from a combination of elementary particles. At the particle engineering lab, they would intentionally remove particles from matter to make it unstable and perform experiments.

Grabbing objects smaller than atoms was difficult to do with a traditional arm. The “Tweezers” were created to use things like magnetism, light waves, and electricity to “absorb” them.

“One wrong move and the atom could collapse.”

“Hah?”

“Nothing,” said Kakine. “There was a lot of pain-in-the-ass preparation what with replacing the sniper Item killed and shooting Oyafune, but it all paid off.”

The driver stared at the large device.

“But what are you going to do with this now that you have it?”

“What? I just explained it to you. I’m going to grab some tiny things. That leads to a way to get to Aleister.”

“???”

The driver had an expression that made it clear he didn’t understand, but Kakine didn’t give any further explanation. He opened up the tool box in the back of the station wagon, took out a screwdriver, and started loosening some screws on the large device.

“A-are you trying to break it?”

“I’m rearranging it,” said Kakine in an annoyed voice. “Do you know why it’s so big? To keep it from being stolen. If you gather together only the necessary parts, it must be a lot smaller.”

A clattering noise continued for a while.

The “Tweezers” had been rearranged into its optimized form.

Kakine had what looked like a metal glove in his hands. The index finger and the middle finger each had a long glass claw coming from them and the glass claws had what looked like even thinner metal stakes in them. On the back of the hand was a small monitor that looked like a cell phone.

The glass claws would extract the particles and the metal stakes inside would carry out various measurements.

“I-it’s that small?”

“Well, it is a state of the art piece of Academy City technology. Advancing too quickly can be a problem too.”

Kakine put his right hand in the glove in order to check on it.

“Okay, feels good. …Contact the others. Time for the next step.”

The driver nodded in compliance.

When he did, a sharp metallic noise rang out through the refrigerated warehouse.

Kakine and the driver looked over and a door-shaped portion of the thick wall of the warehouse had been cut open. The wall collapsed inwards and the bright light of midday came pouring in.

No one was outside.

But the attacker’s influence was clearly coming towards them.

“Gyah! Gwaaaaahhh!?” screamed the driver suddenly.

Kakine looked over and saw the skin disappearing from the driver’s face. Then his fat disappeared followed by his muscles. Finally, his brain disappeared and his clothes and bones collapsed to the ground.

The sound as they hit the ground sounded like light plastic.

Kakine frowned slightly.

“Kakine Teitoku, huh? Losing a Level 5 here would be a shame.”

A voice reached Kakine’s ears, but he couldn’t tell which direction it was coming from.

He focused his attention in all directions and activated the “Tweezers” that he had just rearranged.

(I never would have guessed I’d have to use this here.)

“…Group, I assume. Or maybe Item.”

“Sorry, but I am from Member. Oh, Kakine boy, do you smoke?”

The voice from an unknown source was that of a middle-aged man.

“When people remove a cigarette from the box, they tap the box with their finger, right? When I was a kid, I didn’t understand why. However, I thought it looked cool, so I would tap my candy boxes.”

“Ahh?”

“I’m saying that you’re doing something like that now.”

“Are you making fun of me? Cause it sounds to me like you want to become a nice corpse.”

That was when an electronic beep came from the “Tweezers” on his right hand.

Looking at the monitor, he could see that there was some kind of tiny mechanical object mixed in with the particles of air the device had collected. In the world one could only see with an electron microscope, there was something obviously manmade.

“Nanodevices, hm? You tore off his cells one at a time.”

“No. *Mine* are nothing as grand as that. They have no circuitry or power. They merely give specific responses to specific frequencies. They’re just little bits of reflective alloy. I call them ‘Mimosa’.” The middle-aged man spoke in a bored voice from wherever he was. “But by using various frequencies, they can be controlled much like controlling a radio controlled car with a TV remote. Normally, they are placed on microorganisms in the air and spread around that way.”

A vague noise surrounded Kakine Teitoku.

He quickly looked around, but the Mimosa attacked before he could find a path of escape.

The Professor of Member was standing at leisure outside of the refrigerated warehouse along with a mechanical beast. In his hand was a small computer terminal that was displaying the status of the program controlling the Mimosa.

The Professor was in a bazaar that looked like it had been built along the sidewalk. Business vehicles were allowed to park in that area and a commercial van that looked like a crepe stand was opened up with all sorts of fruits inside.

The mechanical beast next to him spoke.

“So they were in the refrigerated warehouse in District 4 just like the higher ups said they would.”

“That’s the power of the upper classes. Academy City is their territory. The city is overflowing with strange technology. It’s impossible to run away.”

The Professor spoke quietly while biting into a fruit from a southern country that

was so red it looked poisonous.

“Art brought me to despair in the winter when I was 12.”

The mechanical beast listened to the Professor’s words in silence.

“I adored European architecture. I fell in love with the large scale of the ‘creations’ that people had made over a long period of time in order to complete a single ideal of beauty. But, at the same time, they were hard to understand. It’s easy to look at the outer appearance of a building and call it beautiful. However, in order to thoroughly understand every little piece of the design, its large scale makes it necessary to put in an equally large amount of time. To be honest, there are just so many things to focus on that it becomes tiresome.”

“So that’s why you’re so attached to formulas.”

“Indeed,” the Professor nodded. “Formulas are wonderful. There is no waste, they are efficient. All sorts of beauty is included in the smallest possible space. In that alone, formulas have a beauty to them and they also have a haiku-like poetic beauty. And you can look through all that beauty in a single row without missing a thing. …I want to find the beauty hiding in the corners of the world and softly admire that wonderful beauty. I will bow down to whoever I have to in order to do that. I don’t care if I’m called Aleister’s dog.”

The Professor looked down at his watch.

The Mimosa should be done eliminating the enemy.

(Aleister won’t be happy that I’ve killed the 2nd Level 5, but it shouldn’t be a problem as he can just make a new Level 5.)

“Okay, let’s go. This job will be over once the ‘Tweezers’ have been reclaimed and the other three with School have been taken out.”

“What about our Member teammate, Saraku, who was taken out near the terminal station in District 23?”

“Accelerator called him Kill Point, didn’t he? Well, he isn’t dead, so we can just leave him. If you have time, go retrieve him.”

The Professor spoke.

But the mechanical beast did not respond.

There was a loud explosion.

It came from within the refrigerated warehouse.

The great force shattered the glass on the buildings in the area. People ran around screaming and there was even a slight disturbance around the commercial van in the bazaar facing the sidewalk.

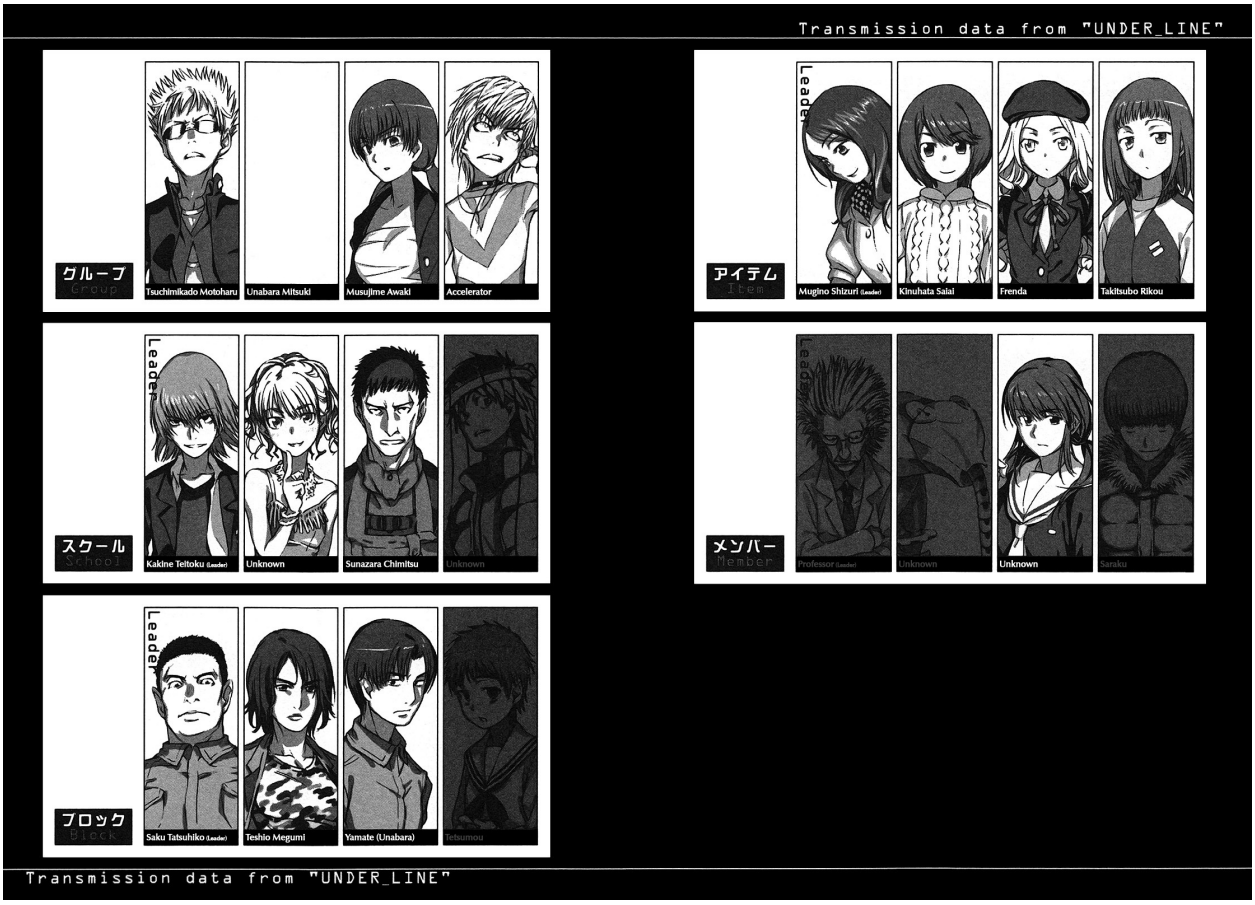
Dust enveloped the area.

Kakine Teitoku slowly walked out of the dust.

There was no injury on him.

Not even a scratch.

“Yo. So you say you were brought to despair in the winter when you were 12?”



The Professor hurriedly sent out commands to the Mimosa, but there was no response. Most of the tiny particles in the air had been blown away in the explosion, so the Mimosa in the area was too far away.

The Professor looked to be at his wit’s end and Kakine gave a small smile.

As he smiled he spoke.

“It’s about time you had another dose of despair.”

Chapter 3: In the Land of Sealed Powers.
Reformatory.

Part 1

A cold sweat had appeared all over Baba Yoshio's body.

He was part of Member just like the Professor. He provided support for the Professor by remotely controlling the four-legged robot.

"You bastard…Don't go off and die like that!!"

He cursed the man, but the dead weren't going to come save him.

Baba clicked his tongue and began preparations for evacuation. He was a few hundred meters below the ground in the underground city developed in District 22. Specifically, he was in a nuclear shelter for VIPs known as the "Summer Resort". It was the private property of a member of the board of directors, but, since it wasn't used very often, he had deactivated the security and was using it for himself. The inside was made to be like a luxurious villa and it even had special lines for net conferences, so it was a wonderful place for a hacker like Baba. He had had his eye on the place for a while, but, now that he was trying it out, he found it to be truly exceptional.

However, it was not an area of complete safety.

He didn't know what power his enemy had, but the thick walls would be of no use against a teleportation-type esper. The Professor had been easily killed by one of Academy City's seven Level 5s. Someone like that would easily be able to force open the shelter's door. Not to mention that it was even possible that the

enemy could come with the latest equipment like an anti-barrier shotgun.

(It won't take him long to suspect I'm here. I need to get out of here!!)

He stuffed the various pieces of machinery centered around his notebook computer in his bag, grabbed the piles of cash that had been stored in the "Summer Resort", and headed for the exit elevator.

But there was no response when he pressed the button.

"…?"

He headed for the door to the stairs that were located elsewhere, but the door wouldn't unlock.

That was when the lights in the shelter turned bright red. Startled, Baba looked over to the shelter's maintenance control monitor. It read, "For security reasons, all locks have been closed."

Baba's eyes bulged and he heard an odd noise.

It almost sounded like a waterfall.

It was quite a noise. It had to be in order to be audible through the thick shelter walls.

"Water…!?"

Some very bad possibilities ran through the back of Baba Yoshio's mind.

If someone was pouring tons upon tons of water down the elevator shaft or the stairwell using a fire hose…

The automatic motors – to say nothing of a human's arms – would be unable to open the doors with that much water pressure. And even if the doors could be opened, an overwhelming deluge of a tremendous amount of water was all that waited on the other side.

Member had a teleportation-type esper named Saraku (Accelerator had called him Kill Point), but he had been defeated in District 23. There was no one to

save him in this situation.

“Tch!!”

Baba hurriedly pulled his notebook computer from his bag and turned it on. He then connected to the communication line for net conferences and contacted someone else from Member. The Professor and Kill Point were gone, so there was only one person left to contact. It was a girl who the Professor had called a magician.

However, the answer to the email explaining his situation came quickly and was quite brief.

“If I remember correctly, the information you collected on the organizations is stored on different servers for each organization. With that, I don’t need you. I will pursue my enemy. I don’t have time to clean up your mess.”

“That bitch!!” yelled Baba.

He thought about abandoning all ideas of shame and honor and asking either the subordinate organization or the “person on the phone” for help, but then his computer screen froze. He had a very bad feeling about what that meant and tried to fix it. However, it seemed the communications cable had been physically severed. Now he could not get new information.

Baba unplugged his computer and groaned. He tried to force himself to think positively, but he could only come to one conclusion.

He was trapped.

When he accepted that fact, he could feel a dark pressure bearing down on him from the thick walls that had seemed so reliable up until then. How much food did he have? Would the oxygen last? When would rescue come? Would it come at all?

Baba’s impatience accelerated as those thoughts circled through his head and he finally threw his bag to the ground, tore hair from his head with both hands, and gave a beast-like scream.

He was in the safest place in the world. He had enough oxygen and food

surrounding him to live comfortably for an entire year. And yet Baba Yoshio's mind was devoured by the monster known as imagination.

Part 2

District 11.

Academy City did not border the ocean, so materials could only be brought in and taken out via either land or air. District 11 shared a border with the outer wall and functioned as the entrance for the land route.

The members of Block and Unabara Mitsuki were there.

Rectangular buildings were lined up in the area. Unlike normal buildings, these buildings lacked walls and looked like parking garages. Academy City-made electric cars were parked in them in preparation to be shipped out.

District 11's warehouse district was large and over 7000 tons of materials were brought in and out of it each day.

The area around the gate that directly managed what came in and went out was quite strictly controlled, but the warehouse district couldn't be guarded from end to end. The district resembled a typical harbor wharf. It was the kind of place where shady deals often went down night after night in old mafia movies.

And…

(That's the outer wall…)

Unabara moved his gaze in that direction.

Even though he was easily more than 500 meters away, the wall looked almost

majestic in its great size. There was a pathway on top of the Great Wall of China-like wall and using binoculars they could tell that drum-shaped security robots were going to and fro on top of it.

Some magicians had made it across the outer wall, but that was because the wall was protected by “scientific” sensors making it susceptible to “magical” tactics.

(That’s what I hope anyway. I’d rather not think about the possibility that Aleister calculated out that far and was just letting us in.)

However, due to the surveillance from the satellite being out, the strength of the security had fallen greatly. Now normal people who couldn’t use magical methods had a chance as well.

On the other side of the wall, the 5000 mercenaries Saku had called for should be waiting.

They must have been waiting for Academy City’s security satellite to go out while scattered around hiding in nearby buildings and vehicles.

Unabara knew all that, but he hadn’t been given a chance to pass that information along.

The rest of Group did not know about all this. He didn’t know whether the upper classes of Academy City knew or not. It was highly likely that they were breathing a sigh of relief for stopping the attack on the satellite.

(So Block called these mercenaries in to obtain their goal… But what could that be? Where are they going to attack…?)

“Are you worried, Yamate?” said Teshio Megumi suddenly as she stood nearby.

Yamate was the name of the man who Unabara was disguised as.

“Not really…” was Unabara’s short reply.

Normally, he would follow the person he wanted to disguise as for at least a week examining them. If he didn’t have a good grasp of the person, it was best not to speak carelessly.

Teshio didn’t seem too worried about how Unabara was acting.

She probably thought he was nervous about their big plan.

“We took out the satellite, but those damn security robots are still moving around,” said Saku Tatsuhiko.

Teshio turned her head towards the large bear-like man.

“Is that a problem?”

“No. Robots like that aren’t equipped with guns, so they can’t harm us. They can get over the wall if they time it right.”

“Why aren’t they armed?” said Unabara deciding to join in the conversation.

Saku glanced over at him.

“There are various reasons. Those robots are usually used to guard the outer perimeter. If they malfunctioned and shot someone walking outside of the wall, it’d be a huge problem. There’s also a problem with reloading. That model of robot can’t change out a magazine, so once they’re out, they’re out.”

“So if we’re spotted, they’ll sound the alarm, and that’s it?” said Teshio Megumi in a disappointed sounding voice. “In that case, couldn’t we have just broken our way through without going to all this trouble?”

“No. The security robots on the outer wall have a special communications line. When they sound the alarm, it’s sent directly to the control area in District 23 and the unmanned attack helicopters are sent in. It would mostly be ‘Six Wings’, the latest model that was shown off at the Interceptor Weapon Show. Things won’t be easy if we’re spotted.”

Saku looked down at the watch wrapped around his thick arm.

“In 10 minutes, the security robots will change rotation.”

“…”

“They’re powered by electricity, so they can’t continue moving for 24 hours.

They have to recharge somewhere. That's why they're split up between the active group and the recharging group."

Apparently, due to this switching out, there was a 20 to 30 minute gap in the security.

Normally, that wouldn't be a problem because Academy City's satellite would still be watching over the city and the area around it.

But that currently wasn't so.

Those 20 minutes would be a true blank space.

"Prepare as many vehicles as possible. Don't forget to change out the license plates." Saku Tatsuhiko instructed one of the men from Block's subordinate organization. "Use the electric cars scheduled to be shipped out that are parked in the parking garages. We need to use them to transport 5000 people."

Part 3

The 20 minute gap in security began.

While surrounded by rectangular parking garages in District 11's warehouse district, Unabara Mitsuki focused on the obsidian knife in his pocket.

He wasn't going to have a chance to contact Accelerator and the others in Group.

Even if he did contact them now, there was no guarantee that they would be able to rush over right away.

From what he could hear Saku Tatsuhiko saying into his radio, the mercenaries were apparently throwing ropes up to secure the pathway. He looked through a

pair of binoculars one of his supposed “comrades” passed him and saw several human figures climbing up onto the outer wall.

(…I have no choice,) thought Unabara.

The Spear of Tlahuizcalpantecuhtli was a projectile-like spell that reflected the light of Venus and disassembled whatever the reflected light hit. Whatever the light hit would be disassembled, but it could not attack multiple targets at once.

(The main problem is what to use my one attack on.)

There were 5000 mercenaries.

Turning the spear on them was meaningless. That would do nothing but leave him 4999 enemies.

He could aim for one of the main members of Block.

He thought that taking out Saku who was acting as commander would have some effect, but the plan seemed too far along to be completely stopped by taking out the leader.

(I need to aim for something that will have more of an effect…)

Unabara removed the binoculars from his face.

(What can I attack that will cut them off in one blow…?)

He moved his gaze completely away from the mercenaries scaling the outer wall.

He was assaulted by an intense feeling of tension, but he didn’t have time to hesitate.

(There!!)

He pulled out the obsidian knife.

He was aiming the light of Venus towards…

The nearby parking garage.

Saku Tatsuhiko and Teshio Megumi merely stared at Unabara when he pulled out the obsidian knife. They had no knowledge of magic, so they had no idea what he was doing.

However, their imaginations filled in the blanks when they saw him start running towards the building followed by the parking garage suddenly beginning to collapse.

There was a loud dull noise.

The parking garage made of reinforced concrete Unabara was running towards began to disassemble as if the pillars holding it up were being removed one by one. As the building materials struck the ground, they smashed the asphalt sending dust into the air.

“Wha-...? Yamateeeeeee!!”

Unabara heard Saku yell at him from behind.

Shortly thereafter, he heard the metallic noise of multiple guns being aimed.

Unabara ignored them and ran.

With a clattering noise, the giant pieces of concrete rained down like in a cave-in. Those pieces protected Unabara’s back from the rain of bullets. The electric cars were crushed in midair and sharp edges struck the ground. The one bit of good fortune was that the cars didn’t use gasoline and therefore did not explode.

Unabara aimed the obsidian knife down lower.

He destroyed the ground using the light of Venus and jumped into the sewer in order to protect himself from the falling concrete.

However, the amount of building materials coming down was simply too great and they started flattening the sewer itself down towards Unabara.

“Oooooohhhhhh!!”

He started running, tripped and fell to the ground, and then started crawling forward.

Finally, the collapse of the parking garage was over.

The shock must have damaged the sewer all over, because it had caved-in making it impassable both behind him and in front of him.

The roof above him had been destroyed letting some bright rays of light in.

Unabara put his hands to the wall and started climbing up while looking up at the blue sky above.

And there he saw…

Part 4

District 23's Air Superiority Preservation Control Center received an emergency signal from the area around the outer wall in District 11.

However, it did not immediately send out unmanned helicopters. It was possible the signal had been an error. The final decision was left to an operator. When a human connected the plug into the circuit, the command was sent out and the unmanned helicopters went out for their first defense mission.

Normally, the operator would have been using a complicated manual that was dozens of pages long.

But with control of the satellite temporarily out, special defense conditions were applied. The operator disregarded the manual and inserted the plug right away sending out the order.

Three unmanned attack helicopters were on standby on a large asphalt area of the ground.

They were state-of-the-art HsAFH-11's, aka "Six Wings".

Receiving their orders, the rotors began spinning and they slowly left the ground.

Part 5

The Six Wings unmanned attack helicopters floated in the air above District 11.

They were similar to the AH-64 Apache and had one "wing" on either side that had guns and missiles equipped on them.

Helicopters were aircrafts that created lift with the rotor on its vertical axis and moved using the angle of that rotor.

Using that definition, the Six Wings did indeed qualify as helicopters.

But with its 2 rocket engines for auxiliary power and its top speed of Mach 2.5, it was a bit of a mystery whether the Six Wings should be called a helicopter or not.

The unmanned attack helicopters used their AI to check the parking garage that had collapsed first and then checked the suspicious figures climbing over Academy City's outer wall a few hundred meters away.

There were about 5000 of them.

After confirming the presence of enemies, their AI brought them to automatic attack mode.

"Damn it, Yamate…!!"

The Six Wings began their attack at about the same time that Saku Tatsuhiko yelled in anger.

With a metallic noise, the wings on either side of the crafts spilt into three. They now truly had “six wings”. The thin wings even had joints and moved almost like human arms as they aimed their various weapons.

“Here it comes!!” yelled Teshio Megumi as the roar of the attack helicopters’ machine guns began.

It was less like strafing and more like an explosion.

Teshio Megumi leaped behind the station wagon they had used to get there, but it began expanding after receiving fire. It then was devoured by orange light as it exploded. Teshio was blown a few meters by the blast before she landed on the ground and ran to find some more cover.

“!? They’re using Flame Crash bullets!?”

The bullets were made of extremely heat resistant metal and had special grooves carved in them so that air friction heated them up to 2500 degrees. When those bullets pierced armor, they would burn away the electrical circuits and the fuel tank inside.

The attack on the mercenaries scaling the outer wall a few hundred meters away had begun.

The group of mercenaries exploded like a giant balloon. Even from a distance, a red spray could be seen. The attack must have had quite a bit of force behind it because even some of the unharmed mercenaries fell down from the outer wall. The helicopters started mowing down the rest starting with the ones that were firing back.

At this rate, they would all be killed.

Teshio Megumi yelled towards Saku Tatsuhiko who was a bit away from her.

“We need to give up on the mercenaries!! Traveling in large numbers while being watched from above is nothing more than being a giant target!!”

“That’s 5000 people! Do you know how hard I’ve worked for this moment!? Do you really think I can let it all go to waste!?”

“They’re mistaking this for us having betrayed them. The ones still outside the wall aren’t coming anymore. We need to retrieve the ones that fell inside and fall back!!”

“Fucking Yamate…I’m going to kill him!!” said Saku deep in his thick throat.

“Ha ha. I suppose those things had better be this good since they cost 24 billion yen each…” muttered Unabara as he hid in the rubble after having crawled out of the sewer.

It was the result of his own actions, but the scene still sent a chill down his spine.

He could see a few groups shooting anti-aircraft missiles that they were holding up on their shoulders.

However, the Six Wings merely fired something like a softball at the missiles. Iron sand sprayed out from the balls followed by a high-voltage electric current. A “surface” 20 meters in every direction became an area of electric current and the missiles exploded there.

The Six Wings returned fire with a large number of surface attack missiles which enveloped the area in crimson flames.

(Well, it looks like I kept as many mercenaries from getting in as possible…)

Unabara pressed his back against a large piece of concrete and covered his face with his hands. He tore off the talisman of skin made from Yamate, the man whose face he was borrowing, and put Unabara Mitsuki’s face back on. In doing so, his physique and voice changed to that of another person’s along with his face.

He no longer needed the face of someone from Block.

(The problem now is how to survive this. I’m sure those Six Wings will see me as an enemy, too.)

The Six Wings' objective was to eliminate the mercenaries climbing over the wall.

If he hid until they fell back, the helicopters should leave on their own.

However, the sound of the air being repeatedly sliced brought a pressure to Unabara's heart.

Looking up from behind the rubble, he saw one of the Six Wings moving its sights toward him.

"Looks like it won't be that easy!!"

While yelling, Unabara pulled out his obsidian knife and swung it.

He reflected the light of Venus activating the Spear of Tlahuizcalpantecuhtli and disassembled the Six Wings with his surprise attack.

When they received the report of what happened, the other two Six Wings turned the gun on one of their wings towards Unabara.

They had no problem aiming directly to the side. The wings had joints and could therefore aim at Unabara like a human arm could.

The Spear of Tlahuizcalpantecuhtli could disassemble all kinds of things.

But it could not target multiple objects at once.

"Kh!!"

He tried to hurriedly jump behind cover, but the helicopters were much, much faster.

The attack helicopters he had called in were going to blow him to pieces.

(Is this the end…!?)

Unabara held up the obsidian knife knowing it was hopeless, but something happened before he could do anything else.

He heard a clunk.

It was the sound of a white-haired Level 5 landing on one of the unmanned attack helicopters. He forcibly grabbed the rotor with his hands as it rotated at high speed and stopped its movements. The Six Wings had no way of dealing with this ridiculous action and it fell to the ground and exploded.

“He” casually walked out of the flames.

Unabara Mitsuki finally relaxed.

“Accelerator-san…?”

“I heard about something happening near the outer wall and found this going on when I got here,” said Accelerator in a bored voice as he switched his electrode back to normal mode and leaned on his modern cane. “The others had finished up at the External Connection Terminal and I had destroyed the antenna for the satellite, so I thought it was all over. But then control starts crying about intruders at the perimeter or some shit.”

“Ha ha. I assume you figured out on your own that they used you.”

“I know you didn’t call in the Six Wings for no reason. Where’s Block?”

“They got away,” said Unabara as he wiped sweat from his brow. “I think they managed to gather about 100 of the mercenaries that were coming in from outside.”

“From outside… Tch. So that’s what the satellite was for. Block, Member, and now mercenaries. What’s with all the pieces of shit I’m having to deal with today?”

Accelerator clicked his tongue over all the work he was having to do and continued speaking.

“So you let the intruders in? You really are fucking useless.”

“Well, there was originally going to be 5000 of them.”

“You still failed either way.”

A Six Wings flew through the air as if to cut off his words.

But this time its sights did not turn Unabara's way.

After traversing the area once, the last remaining unmanned helicopter headed back for District 23.

"It looks like the 'clean up' is over."

"They probably didn't like being destroyed by someone on their side," said Unabara while shrugging. "They do cost 25 billion yen each after all."

Part 6

Tsuchimikado Motoharu, Accelerator, Musujime Awaki, and Unabara Mitsuki gathered in the warehouse district of District 11. Unabara had been out of the loop for a bit, so he asked Tsuchimikado a question.

"What is the External Connection Terminal?"

"It's just a little facility. All of the formalities got to be a pain in the ass, so Musujime and I blew up the center of the facility. But there are 3 other terminals, so there won't be any connection problems."

This time, Musujime who had taken action along with Tsuchimikado asked Unabara a question.

"Can we really say this Block organization was behind everything? Didn't we conclude that School was behind the sniper attack on Oyafune Monaka?"

"It doesn't seem Block and School were directly working together. The two have their own plans and they caused separate incidents. They just happened to have a point of contact with Management."

“Tch. And with those Member bastards sneaking around, this turned into a real pain in the ass.”

Tsuchimikado moved his gaze elsewhere while listening to Unabara and Accelerator speak.

The area near the outer wall had blood and flesh scattered all over it, but there were still some survivors. These mercenaries hadn’t been killed, couldn’t get away, and had been left there by Block.

“Okay, question time,” said Tsuchimikado bluntly. “Where exactly were you people going to attack with 5000 mercenaries?”

“Wh-what are you talking about?”

“5000 sounds like a lot, but it isn’t enough to defeat Academy City. I’m asking you what you were hired for, mercenary. What plan did you have that used that many people?”

“…”

The mercenary looked at the faces of the 4 members of Group one at a time.

He seemed to be conflicted.

Whatever he was hesitating over, the disastrous scene around him must have led him to believe that Block had failed or that they had been intending to betray the mercenaries from the beginning. Finally, he slowly opened his mouth.

“…District 10.”

“District 10?”

Land prices in that district were the cheapest and it didn’t have any major facilities. It was filled with things like disposal areas for experimental animals and labs related to nuclear power.

The mercenary continued speaking.

“We were supposed to attack a juvenile hall in District 10.”

“!!”

Musujime Awaki was the one that reacted to his words.

She grabbed the mercenary’s collar.

“Why were you attacking that place…? Is there some VIP criminal you’re trying to rescue!?”

Accelerator thought while watching Musujime as she was overrun with impatience.

Academy City’s juvenile halls were used to house criminals who used psychic powers. He didn’t know the details, but he had heard that they had some kind of esper counter-measure there. If that was true, having a force made up of normal people would raise their odds of success.

The mercenary, who Musujime was holding by the collar, finally said one more thing.

“Our target was…Move Point.”

Musujime Awaki’s eyebrows twitched.

The mercenary must not have known who the woman in front of him was.

“We got some information that Move Point’s companions are being held there. If we capture her comrades, we can negotiate with her.”

(What reason do they have to single me out?) thought Musujime.

But then she realized the answer.

“The guide to Aleister’s ‘windowless building’…”

“Right. The identity of that guide is confidential because she’s a direct line to Aleister. But Block got their hands on the information that the guide is Move Point. So they had her thoroughly investigated in order to find some materials to use in a negotiation.”

“What were you going to negotiate with the guide about?” asked Tsuchimikado.

“We wanted information on the route through which materials are brought into the windowless building. Not even a nuclear weapon can destroy it from the outside, but from the inside it’s an entirely different story. It’s said to not have an entrance or an exit, but materials have to be taken in and out. That can be used to blow up the windowless building from the inside.”

“Blow it up?”

“Block said they have a synchronous multilayer bomb prepared. It’s some kind of tactical weapon that you’ve created here in Academy City.”

A synchronous multilayer bomb was a large bomb that had high power explosives arranged in a regulated manner. A normal tactical weapon spread an enormous blast over a large area while the synchronous multilayer bomb was made to focus a highly destructive blast on one small target so as to utterly destroy it. It was created in order to bomb an enemy stronghold in an urban environment with no civilian sacrifices.

“The chaos in the world needs to be stopped. I’m a mercenary, so I know what I’m talking about. The world is at its limit. Infighting is going to begin before long. War needs to be stopped before it begins.” The mercenary spoke while matching his gaze with each of the members of Group one at a time. “Bringing Move Point herself on our side would be difficult. Someone you can’t trust will always be someone you can’t trust. That’s why we didn’t go after her too much. If our information on Move Point’s power is accurate, this would all go much faster with her help, but there’s no helping that. We went ahead on the assumption that she wouldn’t-…”

“That’s right,” said Musujime interrupting him. “By the way, do you know who you’re talking to right now?”

The mercenary momentarily frowned in confusion and his face turned pale shortly thereafter.

“N-no way. You’re kiddi-…!!”

Before the mercenary could finish speaking, almost 10 of what looked like metal stakes pierced him all over his body.

He passed out from the shock of the pain, but it seemed he was still alive.

Musujime removed her hand from the tattered mercenary and looked down while gritting her teeth.

What she wanted to protect more than anything, what she wanted to protect no matter what she lost in exchange was being taken from her. The other 3 remained silent. As they each had something they felt the same way about, they couldn’t say anything.

Most likely, Aleister was using some kind of strange technology to watch all of this from above. However, he wasn’t about to lend a hand. He had to be watching these people struggling in his garden and smiling.

“Let’s go.”

Finally, Tsuchimikado urged the others on.

From here on out, this was about Musujime Awaki instead of Group as a whole. But none of them made a single complaint about that. Just like when Unabara had mixed in with Block, the members of Group saw this as a different situation than having to get out of predicament that was part of a job someone else had imposed on them.

“We need to go to District 10. Block still has around 100 mercenaries at their disposal. We don’t know what kind of equipment they have, but it clearly isn’t a good situation.”

Part 7

Accelerator and the other 3 in Group, travelled from District 11 in an ambulance they were using for transportation purposes. They were headed for the juvenile hall in District 10.

“This is the only juvenile hall in Academy City. Apparently, the grounds are split in half between the boys side and the girls side.” Tsuchimikado said while operating a notebook computer. “Academy City does not currently have a criminal charge for treason. Because of this, Musujime’s companions are in a situation where they can’t be charged legally. They couldn’t have been put in the facility normally.”

“So there’s a secret room?”

Unabara looked over towards Musujime, but it seemed she didn’t know anything.

“What a fucking pain. Do we not have a map of the layout? If you can’t hack in and get information on a secret passageway, can’t you just get it from the construction company’s computer?”

“This isn’t a normal building. I doubt the company would still have this kind of information.”

Tsuchimikado looked at the screen.

It was displaying quite a bit of data on the juvenile hall, but the layout was kept as a secret so there was nothing he could do from there.

Accelerator realized something while looking at the screen as well.

“This facility doesn’t have a firefighting group.”

Accelerator looked over the displayed data again.

“Fires don’t happen there often, so they got rid of it to save on the budget. But that means the fire department has to come in if there is a fire. They must have been given a map of the layout so they can move through that maze-like facility properly.”

Hearing that, Tsuchimikado changed the target of his cracking.

He had the answer quickly.

“Here it is. Classified areas are covered up, but, if there is a secret staircase, it

has to be here. The basement area for traitors has to be beyond here."

Since there was only one area the hidden staircase would be, the area for traitors must not be separated by sex. They were all in solitary confinement, so there wouldn't be any shared areas.

"This was hidden, so do you think Block has this information, too?"

"Ha. Group and Block have the same level of authority. Anything we can find, they can find, too. And the information on Musujime is at the same level of classification in the databank."

Musujime glared at Accelerator, but he didn't flinch and continued speaking.

"Tsuchimikado. What kind of defenses does the facility have?"

"The jailers use the old MPS-79 powered suits. They have anti-esper equipment, but I wouldn't expect too much from them. The jailers only have tools to defend themselves against rampaging espers and Block is using real weapons. The mercenaries left in District 11 had blades, handguns, rifles, bombs, and other kinds of weapons from 'outside', but I'm sure Block reequipped them with the latest weaponry. According to Unabara, over 100 of those mercenaries alone are still active. We don't know how many people Block has or what their powers are. What's important is whether they can kill or not. Powered suits are large, sturdy targets."

"Not that," interrupted Accelerator. "The juvenile hall is filled with dangerous espers. What kind of anti-esper equipment do they have?"

"They have about 25 different kinds starting with an AIM jammer."

"So we can't use our powers inside?"

"You can. Basically, it dissolves your concentration and intentionally leaves you with thoughts that make you more easily tracked by a Psychometer. It'll weaken you a bit, but not enough to eliminate your power altogether. Working as a guard there is apparently in the worst 3 occupations from an insurance company's point of view. In a facility that large, it's impossible to eliminate psychic powers completely."

“But,” Tsuchimikado continued, “it’s possible to have your powers go out of control in those conditions. Powers that use complex calculations are especially prone to this. A normal esper would end up just being injured, but it would be much too dangerous for you or Musujime. You need to watch out if you don’t want to end up killing yourself in an incredibly stupid way.”

Part 8

When the ambulance stopped at the juvenile hall in District 10, Accelerator, Tsuchimikado Motoharu, Unabara Mitsuki, and Musujime Awaki got out of the back door.

They couldn’t see the inside of the facility from there because it was surrounded by a wall almost 15 meters high. However, they could smell an unhealthy smelling smoke from where they stood.

“…!!”

Musujime was grinding her teeth and started to head in through the already-destroyed gate, but Accelerator frowned while leaning on his modern cane.

“Something isn’t right.”

“So you noticed it too,” said Tsuchimikado slowly as he pulled a military handgun from his pocket. “There’s no noise. If Block and the guards are fighting, we should be hearing some gunshots.”

The four of them passed through the gate that doubled as an inspection point and came to a traffic circle for the vehicles that shuttled prisoners around. When he stepped onto the 20 meter across area of flat asphalt, Accelerator felt a slight pain in his temple.

“...So that’s the AIM jammer.”

He looked up and saw a number of thin wires stretched out between the almost 15 meter walls covering the entire facility. They must have been emitting a special electromagnetic wave.

It was most likely set up so it would diffusely reflect an esper’s AIM diffusion field causing the esper to interfere with his own power. Accelerator had never heard of Anti-Skill being equipped with it, so it must need a large amount of electricity and processing power and thus could only be used in a limited area.

(It doesn’t seem to be hindering my ability to walk, but I should avoid switching over to esper mode.)

Even so, Accelerator thought he would still be able to use his power in the facility. He just didn’t want to use it if he didn’t have to in order to avoid having it go out of control. It was possible he would end up getting wrapped up in his own power.

(They’re using a lot of other devices, too. Are they purposefully trying to make this difficult?)

If he knew what kind of equipment they were using, he might have been able to find a way to overcome it, but he interrupted his thoughts there. He had realized where his uncomfortable feeling about the juvenile hall was coming from.

The bodies.

They most likely belonged to the mercenaries Block had invited in from outside. Close to 50 large men were collapsed with blood spreading out from them. Some had been shot in the temple with a handgun, some were missing their heads from being shot at point-blank range with a shotgun, and some had had their throats slit by a knife. They had been killed in all sorts of different ways, but there was one common factor.

“They all lost their lives to their own weapons…” commented Tsuchimikado.

“Was it suicide…? No, this was-…” muttered Unabara.

And then…

“Found you,” said a voice behind them.

Accelerator spun around and saw a girl blocking the destroyed gate. The short girl was wearing a red sailor uniform that must have been some school’s uniform. But there was an odd light in her eyes. It wasn’t just the look of a killer.

“I assume you’re one of the fuckers from Block.”

“No, I’m from Member. I just used them; I had no interest in joining them.” Responded the girl carelessly.

She had most likely attacked the mercenaries who were collapsed around the area. That would mean she had defeated almost 50 mercenaries without receiving a single scratch, but she made no attempt to claim the act as her own. She seemed to truly have no interest in the mercenaries or in Block.

(Member again…!?)

Accelerator had run into someone from Member back at District 23, but they didn’t seem to be moving as allies of Block. In fact, he had no idea what they were after or which organizations they saw as their enemies. But it didn’t really matter because he would deal with anyone who made themselves his enemy the same way.

However, there was one person who reacted upon seeing her.

“…It couldn’t be. Are you…?”

It was Unabara Mitsuki, an agent whose real name and face were unknown.

“So you’re finally going to ask who I am, are you, Etzali?”

She looked at Unabara Mitsuki and called him a completely different name.

Or maybe that was his real name.

Unabara was so shocked he couldn’t move and the girl wiped her face with a hand. Her face disappeared. Her Asian looks were gone and she now stood there with dark skin and finely chiseled features.

“I need to thank Block. Esper powers are halved here, so I don’t have to worry so much about your companions getting in the way.”

After seeing that face and hearing that voice, Unabara’s expression distorted.

“Xochitl, why are you here? I thought you didn’t have a spell that could do this. And you were supposed to be in a position in the ‘organization’ that kept you away from any dirty work!!”

“There is only one reason,” said the brown girl called Xochitl as her expression remained unchanged. “I abandoned everything to come take you out because you went over to Academy City’s side, you damn traitor!”

“So that’s it,” muttered Tsuchimikado as he turned his gaze towards Unabara.

Unabara spoke quietly.

“…I’ll hold her back here. You three go on ahead.”

He sounded like he was squeezing his words out of his throat.

“Her name is Xochitl. She’s an Aztec magician who belonged to the same ‘organization’ as I did before coming here.”

The girl called Xochitl’s expression remained unchanged after hearing Unabara’s words.

“I’m only here for Etzali. I don’t care if you go off, but I wonder if they’ll let you.”

Gunshots rang out.

Accelerator and Tsuchimikado hid behind a vehicle for shuttling prisoners that was parked in the traffic circle. As they did, they heard a large number of footsteps coming out from one of the buildings.

“So Block’s mercenaries were waiting to see what would happen… Do we really have to deal with them?”

Tsuchimikado asked Xochitl that, but she ignored him. Xochitl truly did only

want to get rid of anyone who was in her way, so she really had no interest in Block or the mercenaries.

However, as they were held up by the mercenaries, Block would be getting further and further into the facility. And they were here in order to take Musujime Awaki's comrades hostage.

"Tch," Accelerator clicked his tongue.

"God damn it. You go on ahead."

"But you…"

"I can't walk without my cane. I can't use my powers carelessly and we can't count on your Move Point. It makes sense for the slowest person to stay back to hold them off," Accelerator said quickly. "Tsuchimikado, you provide support for Musujime. We have no idea how many people from Block are in there. We need to plan on there being a large group in there you have to fight."

He didn't bother to give instructions to Unabara.

Accelerator would intercept the mercenaries coming out of the building, Unabara would take care of Xochitl from Member, and Tsuchimikado and Musujime would rescue the people in the special cells.

The four members of Group kept their separate objectives in mind, met each other's gaze, and nodded.

"Let's go!!"

The four of them started their various tasks.

Part 9

Tsuchimikado and Musujime headed down the hidden stairway they had found exactly where they had predicted they would and headed for the special cells for the undocumented traitors.

They came across 2 or 3 mercenaries on the way, but Tsuchimikado silenced them with his handgun. Since the girl called Xochitl had taken most of them out and Accelerator was holding more of them off, there weren't many mercenaries left to get in their way.

Then Musujime felt a slight pain in her head.

"…The AIM jammer is even stronger."

"There are devices for outdoors, buildings, and individual rooms. The different pieces of equipment add their effects on top of each other. This is Academy City's only juvenile hall and is therefore the only anti-esper equipped facility in the world. Normal defenses wouldn't be enough."

Tsuchimikado must have been feeling a similar sensation.

It felt more like it was messing up her aim than it was holding her power in check or restraining it. It felt like she would get caught up in her own power if she carelessly tried to use it.

"Musujime. Your power is strong, but that also means one accidental discharge of it could take your life. It would be best if you didn't use it here."

"You make it sound like I have no value beyond my power."

"Shh."

Tsuchimikado held his index finger up to quiet Musujime.

The stairway and the hallway connected in an L-shape and he had heard a loud noise from around the corner. It was the sound of someone forcing open a bolted-on metal panel by sticking a metal stake in the gap. Tsuchimikado silently raised his handgun. Musujime normally relied on her power and therefore didn't have any kind of projectile weapon, so she pulled out her flashlight that could also be used as a baton.

Tsuchimikado and Musujime jumped out into the hallway.

It was a narrow passageway. Metal solitary confinement doors lined both sides and a large bear-like man was sticking something that looked like clay on one of them. A muscular woman was watching his progress from the side.

They looked up at the two who had entered.

“You have to be from Group to be here now,” said the large bear-like man.

Musujime didn’t immediately act because of the facility’s various anti-esper devices including the AIM jammer. Tsuchimikado aimed his gun between the large man’s eyes. But before he could fire, the man stuck a wire in the clay stuck to the door.

“This is a plastic explosive and this is an electric fuse.”

A stern expression appeared on the muscular woman’s face.

“Saku!!”

“It’s no use, Teshio. We have to use a hostage here.”

The large man named Saku slowly removed his hand from the bomb with the fuse stuck in it.

He was holding a device in his hand. It was the switch to detonate the bomb.

“…If you use that here, you’ll be the first one to be blown to bits.”

“The amount of explosive is set and I’ve adjusted the directionality some. The blast will all go into the door.” Saku pointed towards the bomb stuck to the door. “But the shockwave will wreak havoc inside that cell. And the pieces of the destroyed door won’t help matters. Destroying the door is easy, but ensuring the safety of the person inside is quite difficult. And since you two showed up to get in my way, I can’t finish.”

“…!!”

A loud explosion suddenly rang out.

It was due to Musujime's power exploding as she bared her teeth. A few of the fluorescent lights on the ceiling disappeared and pierced into the walls and floor.

And yet Saku and Teshio showed no concern on their faces.

"…Musujime Awaki, the Move Point." Saku smiled while gripping the switch to detonate the bomb. "Good, this saves us some time. We have both a hostage and the person to negotiate with. Let's get this started, former guide to the windowless building."

"And if I refuse?"

"You won't. Do you really want your powers to go out of control?"

Musujime went silent at that. If it weren't for the anti-esper devices, she could have just skewered Saku.

"Group, huh? Did you learn anything from the 0930 Incident?"

"What?"

"We did. We had thought that this fucked-up world was controlled by Aleister from end to end, but that isn't so. There are ways to escape his control and places to hide from him. Wonderful, isn't it? It's so wonderful it makes it seem absolutely ridiculous that we were bound by Academy City for so long. With the 0930 Incident and now the riots in Avignon, we have a chance. There's no way we can overlook this opportunity."

"So you're headed to a new world trampling others in the process. That isn't something to sound so self-important about. It just reminds me of the massacres during the Age of Exploration."

"I see. Wishing for a heaven or a paradise you don't currently have is something all humans do."

Listening to their conversation, Tsuchimikado looked at the switch Saku was holding.

With his skill, he could shoot it from Saku's hand. However, he couldn't guarantee he would succeed and it was possible it would just happen to land on

the button and blow the door up anyway. If that happened, Musujime's comrade would be killed no matter where he hid in the cell.

Musujime put so much force into her jaw it looked like she was going to break all of her teeth.

Seeing that, the muscular woman, Teshio, spoke to Saku.

"..Using a hostage here isn't going to help."

"What are you talking about, Teshio? It all starts here. The hostage's value just went way up."

"The hostages were supposed to be used to get Move Point into the negotiation because we didn't know where she was. Musujime is right in front of us. The hostages' role is over. Using the bomb here will just make her more stubborn."

Teshio stared at the bomb on the door.

"Thinking back, I was against this from the beginning. I only agreed to the hostage part of the plan because it was absolutely necessary. Now that it isn't needed, we can leave the hostages alone."

"We can't do that, Teshio. Right now, we have 38 hostages! Do you understand what that means!? This is a vast fortune. We have so much, wasting a bit of it doesn't matter!! …Did you start feeling empathy for these kids from working with Anti-Skill for too long!?"

"…Saku."

"Don't get in my way!! I'm going to kill that bastard Aleister!! This is the first step. It can't all end here!! I can't waste all my time here. If you get in way, I'll kill you too, Teshio!! I'd rather not, but…"

Saku's didn't finish his sentence.

This was due to the fact that Teshio punched his huge body as hard as she could.

From the sound alone, the punch clearly had a lot of force behind it. Most likely, the man from Block had no idea what had happened to him. He was knocked

back into the wall and slid to the ground. It was the first time Musujime Awaki had actually seen foam come from a person's mouth. That was how mercilessly she had hit him.

"…Don't waste time on pointless shit."

The woman named Teshio reached her hand out towards the metal door. She took the fuse out of the plastic explosive stuck to the door, removed the bomb itself, and tossed them to the ground.

"Is this enough?" she asked slowly.

"…What are you doing?" asked Musujime with a grim look on her face.

"I apologize for our rudeness. You may beat me to as much as you like."

Teshio's eyes did not waver even as Tsuchimikado aimed his gun at her.

"But I won't give in until we win. I also have a reason to kill Aleister. I won't use any hostages, but I will directly cause you pain until you give me the information."

Part 10

Unabara Mitsuki and Xochitl stood in the juvenile hall's exercise area.

The brown girl pulled a feathered decoration from her pocket and put it next to her ear.

"Are you so impolite as to face me with a false face, Etzali?"

"Sorry, but I like this face. And I have no right to use that face since I left the

‘organization’.”

“You’re wrong about that,” said Xochitl quietly as if to cut him off. “Right now, you don’t even have the right to live.”

“!!”

Unabara felt an odd deadly aura and pulled the obsidian knife from his pocket without thinking. He hadn’t intended to use the Spear of Tlahuizcalpantecuhtli on his former comrade right away.

“What were you looking at as you came here?” said Xochitl in a shocked sounding voice.

As she did, Unabara’s right arm from the wrist to the elbow locked up. Before he could react in surprise, the obsidian knife he was holding *turned towards his face against his will*.

“What!?”

He quickly grabbed his right wrist with his left hand.

The point of the knife slowly moved towards his eye. It may have been because he was right handed, but he couldn’t stop it completely.

Xochitl’s expression remained unchanged.

She didn’t even show any joy at the situation being in her advantage. It looked more like she was watching a boring play.

(Kh…! If I…don’t do something…!!)

“Oooohhhhh!!” yelled Unabara as he forcefully moved his left hand and dislocated his right wrist.

He felt the intense pain of bone scraping bone and then the feeling in his right hand disappeared. The hand lost its grip and the obsidian knife fell to the ground.

Holding his wrist, he moved backwards.

Xochitl pointed towards the ground and spoke with no real change in expression.

“You dropped something. Aren’t you going to pick it up?”

Her spell must have been one that interfered with people’s weapons. It took over the weapon, borrowed its destructive power, and had the enemy commit suicide so she didn’t have to sully her own hands. To escape that attack, he had to abandon all weapons and spiritual items and fight using only spells that could be activated with his bare hands or his body. Meanwhile, Xochitl could use all of her special weapons and skills to attack him.

This gave him an overwhelming handicap that essentially denied him all of human civilization.

(However…)

The Xochitl he knew didn’t use this kind of spell. She was known as the “Corpse Worker”. It may sound macabre, but Xochitl’s job was to obtain residual information from corpses and confirm whether that person’s will was accurate. She only performed after care for the dead by making sure everything was settled at the funeral.

She had studied every kind of magic dealing with the dead, but it was only to be used for peace. The brown girl known as Xochitl had been someone who was not used to hurting people.

“…What happened? No, what is happening in the ‘organization’ right now!?”

Xochitl did not respond to Unabara’s question.

She swung one hand and a huge sword that couldn’t possibly have been hidden in her hand appeared. Unlike Unabara’s knife, the sword’s blade was made of white chalcedony. It was a double-edged sword, but both edges had sharp notches like the ones on the back of a survival knife.

(A macuahuitl…!?)

It was the kind of weapon Aztec warriors used. The Aztec culture did not use metal for weapons, so, instead of chopping like a Japanese katana, the wooden sword had small stone blades lined up on either side so it could cut more like a saw.

“I’ll listen to what you have to say later. Of course, that’s only if you’re lucky enough that your brain doesn’t take too much damage.”

Holding up her macuahuitl, Xochitl started towards him.

Unabara had to fight bare handed, so he had quite a disadvantage.

“Shit!!”

He couldn’t let himself lose.

Unabara back stepped to put some distance between them. Xochitl lost her timing and had to come in even further and Unabara dug some dirt up with his shoe kicking it forwards. When Xochitl stopped due to the dirt getting in her eyes, Unabara tried to kick her in the side.

However, she swung her macuahuitl horizontally.

As Unabara hurriedly drew his foot back in, a thin scratch as if from a razor appeared on his leather shoe.

“That kind of makeshift attack suits you well, traitor,” said Xochitl in a calm voice.

The way she was speaking didn’t sound right to Unabara. Before, she had hesitated to use deadly weapons. Because her job was to read the residual information from the dead, she understood the terror of weapons more than the average person.

And yet…

“But no matter how much you struggle, you have no choice but to fight unarmed. I’ll at least give you the right to defend yourself, but your body will be closer and closer to being torn to shreds each time you do so.”

“…That kind of weapon does not suit you.”

“Are you saying that form suits you? You left the ‘organization’, hid your face, and indulged in the peace of Academy City.”

“Xochitl…”

“If so, then you really are a traitor. If not, then you’re deceiving yourself and have no right to say anything here. Either way, you need to die here!!”

Holding the Aztec sword in both hands, Xochitl came straight toward him. Her eyes, her face, her hands, and her movements all showed no sign of mercy.

She was truly trying to kill him.

He might be able to avoid an attack or two, but he couldn’t keep it up forever. And if she got even one clean hit in, the great loss of blood would take his life. At the moment, it was also difficult to fall back. He needed some room to get away. If turning his back and running would let him avoid being cut down, he would have done so.

On the other hand, Xochitl’s magic was still active, so he couldn’t use any kind of tool to block the attack. If he did that, his own weapon would attack him.

It was a hopeless situation.

“Shit!!”

Unabara clicked his tongue and tried to fall back. The point of the macuahuitl ripped at Unabara’s jacket and cut off a few hairs from his head.

“It’s over.”

Xochitl forcefully stepped forward and brought the macuahuitl down at a distance from which she was sure to hit. And she did it with timing that kept Unabara from avoiding it.

There was no sentimentality in her due to him being her former comrade or having belonged to the same organization.

She swung the sword down with great force.

(…!?)

Unabara lifted the arm with the dislocated wrist above his head. Xochitl saw it

and smiled. She must have been thinking about how it would be useless as a shield. She put her entire weight behind the macuahuitl with its saw-like blades and it struck down with enormous speed.

The blade tore through Unabara's jacket and then into the flesh of his arm. A scraping noise could be heard as it reached the bone. Unabara's face twisted in pain.

But…

That was all.

It did not sever Unabara's arm.

Instead, he gathered strength in his arm while the macuahuitl was still stuck in it and he pushed back.

"Wha-…!?"

Xochitl stood in shock at what had happened and Unabara slammed his foot into her gut. Her small body lost to the momentum and she fell to the ground.

"…The Aztecs did not have the ability to manufacture weapons with metal, so their swords are not all that sharp. Instead of a blade made of a single piece of metal, the blade is made from small stone razors lined up on the side of a wooden staff. Even an expert can't cut bone with it, so he'll go for a grazing strike on an artery with the entire blade. Basically, your sword can be stopped with bone."

Unabara still had the Aztec sword buried in his right arm and he was breathing erratically.

"Why do you think I gave up on avoiding it and brought my arm up to block it? You thought it would sever my arm and go right into my body, so you would never have thought it was an effective means of defense. If I continued to partially dodge it, I would have eventually lost due to lost blood."

It was because Xochitl was a short girl and was unfamiliar with sword fighting, that his strategy worked. A true warrior could have cut him down without having to cut through the bone.

“That’s why I told you that kind of weapon doesn’t suit you.”

Unabara looked down on Xochitl who was having trouble breathing and couldn’t move.

He still couldn’t use a weapon, but he had gotten Xochitl’s macuahuitl away from her. He could now win by strangling her or breaking her neck. From the difference between their sizes, he could easily jump on top of her and prevent her from moving before she could get another weapon.

(Xochitl…)

But Unabara couldn’t do it.

He simply couldn’t.

“I won’t take your life. Just go off somewhere,” said Unabara bitterly as he relocated his dislocated wrist and shook his arm until the sword dislodged itself and fell to the ground.

Hearing him, a slight smile appeared on Xochitl’s lips.

That was when the brown girl’s body began to collapse.

Part 11

The underground passageway was narrow and straight.

And with the facility’s various anti-esper measures including the AIM jammer, Musujime’s power couldn’t be counted on. If she used it carelessly, there was a danger of it going out of control and killing all of them instantly.

That was why Tsuchimikado didn’t rely on Musujime and didn’t try to approach Teshio as he didn’t know how she would attack. He merely held up his handgun and shot an even scattering of bullets to prevent her from escaping.

In response, Teshio kicked up something at her feet.

It was the cloth bag full of the explosive Saku had been using. If he hit that, countless ricocheting bullets would bounce around the narrow passageway like a game of pinball. When Tsuchimikado stopped moving his trigger finger, Teshio ran down the passageway. Her fists were tightly clenched.

“!!”

Tsuchimikado just barely managed to pull the trigger before she got within punching range.

However, Teshio entered a boxing stance and bent over far enough to kiss Tsuchimikado on the knee causing the bullet to pass her by.

Before Tsuchimikado could adjust his aim, she straightened out and tackled him square in the gut. Receiving a blow that felt like it would have been able to destroy a door or even a thin wall, Tsuchimikado’s body flew a few meters back.

A tremendous sound rang out and he had trouble breathing.

“Those movements…Is that Anti-Skill’s arresting technique…?”

“This is my own arrangement. If Anti-Skill used this, the children would die.”

Tsuchimikado fired his gun as they spoke, but Teshio easily dodged his shots just by moving her upper body. She kicked towards him aiming for the moment his clip emptied and the gun was torn from his grip.

Another tackle followed.

With a dull crushing noise, Tsuchimikado became pinned between Teshio’s shoulders and the wall. She quietly moved away from him and his limp body slid to the ground.

“!!”

That was when Musujime Awaki swung down her flashlight behind Teshio.

Teshio lifted her hand above her head to receive the blow from the blunt weapon.

“A professional does not need strange powers or one-liners.”

Teshio responded by connecting a backhand blow to Musujime’s face with her other hand. With a dull impact, Musujime’s body flew to the side and struck one of the doors lining the wall.

“A professional needs only to use her accumulated knowledge of basic strategy to rationally defeat the enemy.”

Then Teshio threw a kick.

With a great noise, the sturdily built door and Musujime’s body were knocked into the cell. Musujime thought her insides had been knocked out of whack by the great shock. She felt an odd urge to vomit, but nothing came out as if her throat was clogged up.

One of her companions must have been in the cell, because she heard someone nearby call her name. From that alone, a bit of energy returned to her limp body.

Teshio stood blocking the broken entrance to the cell.

Musujime held up her flashlight and unsteadily stood up using a hand on the wall to balance. Her companion was urging her to get behind him.

“…You want me to tell you the route through which materials are brought into the windowless building that can’t be destroyed even by nuclear weapons so that you can try to destroy it from the inside with a synchronous multilayer bomb, right?”

“Are you willing to speak now?”

“You can’t defeat Aleister like that. If that was enough, anyone with a teleportation-type power could take him out. Do you really think Aleister of all people doesn’t have some kind of counter-measure for that?”

“It’s true that we may not be able to kill Aleister. He truly is a monster. But,”

Teshio said, “the life-support system he relies on is different.”

“…”

“It’s just a machine. The reason a monster like Aleister is holed up in a stronghold even tougher than a nuclear shelter is clear. I’m saying that he has no replacement for that system. It would be a problem for him if it was blown up.”

“No.”

Musujime worked to regulate her breathing even if just a little bit.

“First of all, that isn’t a ‘windowless building’. If you don’t even know that much, you don’t have any real information. A plan you came up with while only knowing that much has no chance of succeeding.”

“What?”

“You didn’t realize it? A building with no doors or windows would normally be impossible. There are plenty of hints that lead to the truth. For instance, everything needed to live including oxygen is produced inside. And it can stand up to a nuclear attack because it can block radiation. It can also block all the different kinds of cosmic rays emitted by stars.”

“Cosmic rays? …You don’t mean…?”

“No,” Musujime cut her off. “*It isn’t that.*”

Becoming aware of her own powerlessness, she laughed slightly.

It seemed that response had caught Teshio off guard.

“With those hints, you can guess to a certain extent. I have a few ideas myself. But none of them are the answer behind which Aleister lies. The ideas I have are merely composed of the information that has been presented to me. And I highly doubt Aleister has presented all of the information to me.”

“…”

“The one thing I can tell you is that the plan he is carrying out is well beyond our

wildest imaginations. Most likely, this planet itself is nothing more than a disposable tool for him. Do you really think this grand plan can be overcome by the clichéd methods you're using?"

Musujime was trying to stall for time.

She was trying to recover from the damage she had taken.

"That may be, but it doesn't change what I intend to do."

"…Why are you going so far to take out Aleister?"

"I have experienced a tragedy in this city. I do not know whether Aleister was involved or not. I want to ask him for the truth. That is all."

Teshio's words were blunt. She didn't have a boiling desire for revenge, but that was why there was truth remaining in her words. There was no superfluous spin to the story based on passionate emotions.

"That's a clichéd reason."

"Perhaps."

"I was once obsessed with 'truth'. But I didn't obtain inner peace by chasing after it." Musujime's voice was calm. "If Aleister admits that he was involved in the tragedy, will you accept it? If he denies involvement in it, will you accept *that*? Whichever answer you get, you will think it's a lie. You will suspect that there is still something he's hiding from you. If the answer to a question brings no meaning, it's useless to ask it."

"…True."

Teshio did not say anything more than that.

She had already made up her mind, so she would not waver.

"So what will you do?"

Musujime did not respond to the question.

They were in an area treated as top secret within the juvenile hall for criminal

espers. It was secured with esper counter-measures including the AIM jammer. Because of this, she could not use her Move Point to attack.

Deprived of it, Musujime Awaki was nothing more than a normal girl. She didn't have the sharpshooting skills of Accelerator and she didn't excel at hand-to-hand combat like Tsuchimikado.

Thinking about that, a small smile appeared on her lips.

She spoke as she smiled.

"…It's because I think like that that I will never be able to protect anyone."

As she moved her lips, Musujime brought her hand behind her. She grabbed the bundle of cords there and forcibly pulled on them. They belonged to the low frequency vibration treatment device. The electrode device measured the irregularities in her brain waves and emitted a matching stimulus to lower her stress. She pulled the whole thing off. Next, she tossed her flashlight aside.

Musujime now had nothing, but her smile did not collapse.

Seeing that, Teshio of Block spoke with a curious look in her eyes.

"You're going to use it?"

"Yes," decisively responded Musujime immediately. "Sorry, but I'm going to go all out."

A metal stake suddenly appeared in her hand that had previously held nothing. It was one of the parts used in the sturdy lock of the cell door. But Move Point's precision was a bit off. Musujime could feel some of the skin on her palm being scraped off.

The trauma that had eaten at her heart showed its face all at once.

She forced it down and used Move Point again.

This time, she herself disappeared.

Using theoretical 11th dimensional vectors, she overcame the three dimensional

boundaries and appeared right in front of the muscular woman. As she teleported, she felt a violent pressure in her stomach, but she ignored it and tried to stab the metal stake into Teshio's gut.

In response, Teshio stepped back.

Musujime instinctively knew that she could not win if she let this chance slip away.

But when she tried to step forward, she realized she couldn't move her right leg. It felt like a bunch of powerful instant glue had stuck it to the ground, but Musujime remembered that feeling well.

The repulsive feeling was caused by her leg being stuck into the ground from about halfway down the calf and below. She had transported to the wrong spot.

Pain.

Fear.

Shock.

Those emotions she had once experienced exploded in the bottom of her stomach.

(I can overcome this…)

Musujime gripped the metal stake tightly, bit her lip, and suppressed it all. There was a companion she had to protect behind her. In order to protect that life, Musujime Awaki would crush the past that was creeping out!!

(I will overcome this!! I'll overcome everything related to this annoying scar!!)

She stuck with it and moved her leg as if she was pulling it out of mud.

As she did, she heard a tearing sound.

Musujime Awaki did not avert her gaze.

She moved forward.

Like a bullet, Musujime moved towards the Block assassin who was threatening her companion's life while gripping the metal stake and ignoring her torn up leg.

A noticeably thick noise rang out within the cell.

All strength left Teshio's body. She looked like she was leaning up against Musujime and barely moved her lips as she spoke in Musujime's ear.

"…You went easy on me."

The metal stake was in Musujime's hand. However, just before impact, she had spun the stake around so the flat back end hit Teshio instead of the sharp tip.

"Unfortunately," Musujime responded in an uninterested manner, "this is the kind of leadership I wanted."

Part 12

Unabara Mitsuki couldn't believe his eyes.

In the juvenile hall's exercise area, Xochitl's right arm crumbled. This wasn't biological decay.

It was similar to seeing an invisible man having the bandages covering him removed.

The outside skin seemed extremely human-like, but the removal of the bandages left nothing but a hollow cavity. The change had started at her fingertips and had already eroded up to her elbow.

"Xochitl…? What is this!?"

“My body has reached the limit.”

The ends of the brown girl’s arms and legs were “coming apart”, but she smiled thinly as she spoke.

“Here’s a lesson for you. If you make up for your lack of power with a grimoire, this is the fate that awaits you.”

“You don’t mean…you read one!”

“No, I did more than that. You’re an Aztec magician, so you should understand. In our rituals, human flesh is eaten in order to deliver it to heaven. In other words, there is a magical line connecting me and the severed flesh.”

Those words shocked Unabara. He had realized the “meaning” behind the spell that let her control others’ weapons causing them to commit suicide. She had dried her own flesh into a powdered form and spread it around. That powder magically qualified as “a part of her body”, so she could control it like her own arms and legs just by thinking. The same went for objects it was closely packed around.

Xochitl made other people’s weapons a part of her physical body. That was the true form of her spell.

But…

“A spell that removes a part of your body like that will always fail before long! That goes well past the level where you can use a spiritual item to aid you! You should have known that much, Xochitl!!”

“I don’t mind. I wished to punish the one who betrayed the organization and that was my answer. As long as I managed to kill you before it had fully consumed me, I could accomplish the organization’s goal.”

“Damn it!! The organization I knew did horrible things, but not this horrible! What the hell happened while I was gone!?”

Unabara yelled his question, but oddly enough Xochitl’s only response was a small smile.

The brown girl's body was going to have come completely apart before long. To Unabara, it looked like only a third of her body remained. Even if it stopped now, there was obviously no way of saving her life. He could only let that mass of flesh and guts disappear into the air.

(…I don't think just a spell or a spiritual item could cause something this out of the ordinary.)

As the destruction progressed from her arms and legs into her abdomen, Unabara frantically observed the situation.

(The only secret that could be behind this other than those things that I can think of is an "original"!!)

An original of a grimoire was completely autonomously activated and could not be destroyed by anyone. Xochitl had acquired her power by uniting with one of those originals – or more accurately, becoming a part of it. If that was so, it all made sense. Causing everyone with a weapon to commit suicide sounded exactly like the kind of defensive feature a grimoire original would have. And the Aztecs had books known as "codices" that were written on animal skins.

(Animal skins…It couldn't be!!)

Unabara stared blankly at the skin of the brown girl who had now come almost entirely apart.

And written on the inside was…

"Ghhaaaaaaaaaahhhhhh!!"

Unabara Mitsuki looked in carelessly and screamed.

It had only been a few characters. He hadn't looked directly at them; they had only barely entered his field of vision. And yet his brain felt like it was going to split in two. This wasn't like a watered-down copy altered and interpreted for general use. It was a true original.

Unabara held his pounding temples and continued his thoughts while staggering.

(Kh…That was a derivative of the calendar stone written there.)

The calendar stone was an Aztec calendar arranged in a circle. However, the Aztecs used two different forms of calendars at once and believed in the death and rebirth of the sun, so it was an incredibly complex thing to make. What was described on the inside of Xochitl's skin took only the times that dealt with life and death from that calendar and then expanded on it with a religious dissertation.

He couldn't deal with that. It was wrong to even think of opposing it. It was said that not even the Index Librorum Prohibitorum could destroy that book of evil, so there was no way a mere magician could do anything.

But…

Even so…

(I won't let her die…)

Why had a non-combatant like Xochitl infiltrated this far? What was going on in the organization? There were tons of things he wanted to ask. So he couldn't let her die here.

He couldn't destroy the grimoire original.

And even if he could, Xochitl wouldn't last because she depended on the original.

It was impossible for Unabara Mitsuki to win in this situation with his power alone.

So…

(If it's impossible to accomplish with human power, I'll borrow the power of this original!!)

The original could defend against any type of attack and no one could even scratch it, but there was one exception. An original would disclose its information to one who desired that information. If it truly prevented "all kinds of interference", no one would be able to open its pages and the grimoire would lose all reason to exist. He didn't know how it worked, but originals could identify whether someone was a "reader" or "not a reader" and they had a

tendency to cooperate with those who would propagate their information.

That was why Unabara decided to…

(I will take this grimoire for myself.)

If he could obtain ownership of the original, its automatic interception spell would stop. Once he “took it for himself”, he would naturally be able to tear the original from Xochitl’s body. The reason the original was cooperating with her was not because of who she was. It just had to be someone who would act as an evangelist for its knowledge.

Also…

(I’ll trick its decision-making ability. I’ll make it think that it can’t pass itself on if Xochitl dies! Then the original itself will save her life!!)

Unabara Mitsuki could not save Xochitl. That meant he just had to make the original with all its power do it for him. Of course, there was no precedent of this happening. If he failed to deceive the ridiculously powerful original his reward would be death.

But Unabara Mitsuki did not hesitate.

He accepted it all in order to save that brown girl.

Part 13

Dragging her bloody leg along, Musujime Awaki slowly left the solitary-confinement cell.

The other cells were locked. She couldn’t get her companions out of them. And

even if she did try to forcibly break them out, the upper classes of Academy City might just make them disappear.

Even if she had gotten Block out of the way, the fundamental problem remained. She hadn't been able to change the fact that someone held her companions' lives in their grasp.

But Musujime heard a voice from behind say, "I always trusted you." It came from the small window installed in the cell door used to pass meals through. She had heard one of her companions speaking from that mail slot-like opening. He said he trusted her. He said he had been right to trust her. There was relief in his voice. Relief because she had saved his life and because she had come running for his sake.

Musujime Awaki remained motionless for a bit.

Finally, she slowly opened her mouth. But no words came. Her lips were quavering even more than she thought. Even so, she slowly put together her words.

It took a long time, but she finally got a couple of words out.

But that was all they needed.

"Are you done?" asked Tsuchimikado.

Musujime pushed him aside with one hand and headed for the staircase out.

They exited the building and found Accelerator and Unabara Mitsuki. Because they had all fought in their own battlefields, not one of them was unscathed. Even so, the four members of Group joined together once more.

Musujime said nothing.

Looking at her, Tsuchimikado spoke in a bored-sounding voice.

"Well, let's return to the darkness."

Between the lines 3

She slowly walked down the street.

Given her position, it was a place you would never think she would be. Anyone was free to go by on that road, she had no guards, and she merely mixed in with the general crowd. She had five helium-filled balloons in one hand and small children passing by looked at them with greedy eyes.

She held a cell phone in her other hand.

“Y’know, I’m supposed to be in charge of Item. It’s always like this with you… Why are you always calling me for these things that don’t even pay overtime?”

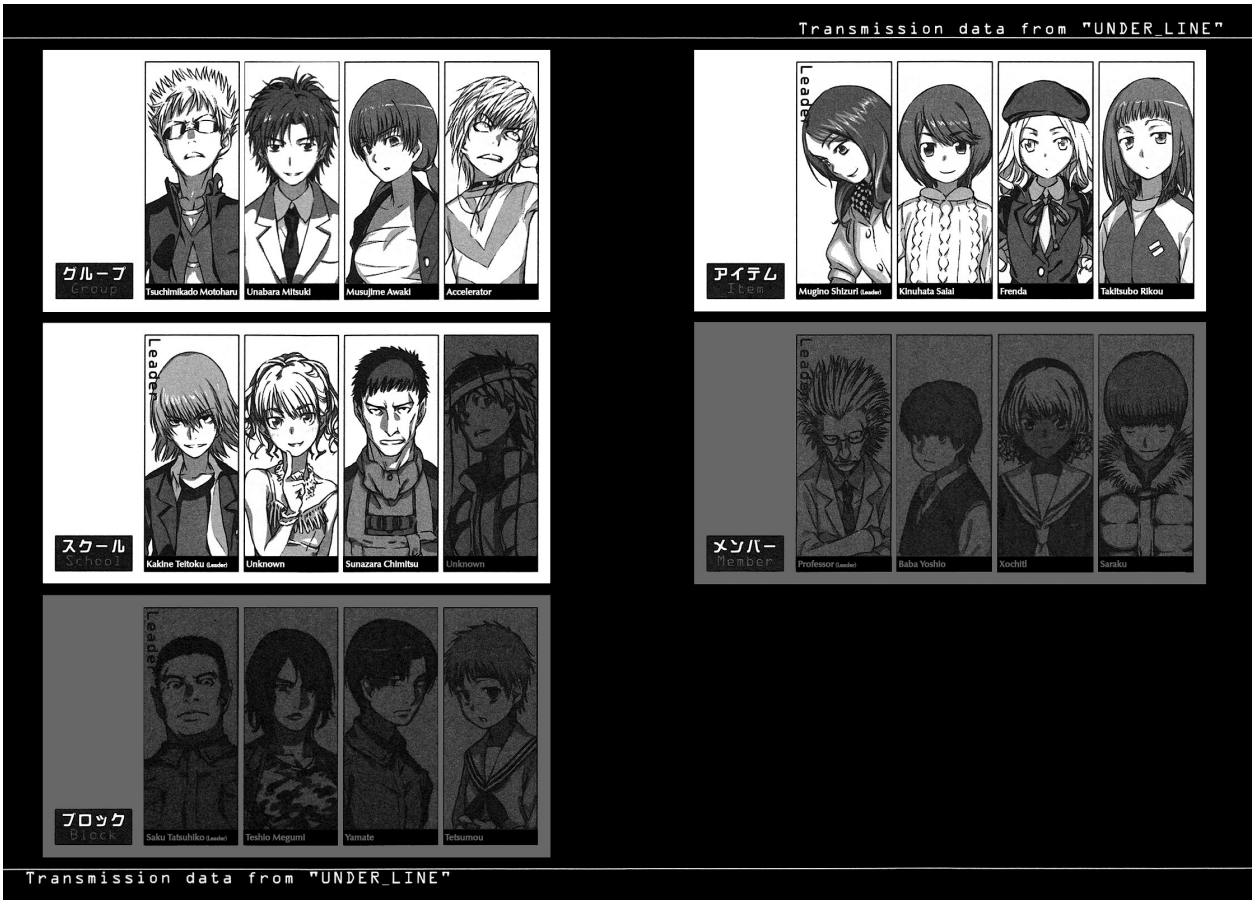
“What are you talking about? I’ll admit I jumped the gun a bit on the whole Block thing. But my power can come back any number of times, so quit keeping the location of and information on Block from me! If I can get a hold of them again, there will be no damage done to Academy City.”

“There’s no problem damage-wise. Apparently, Group just took out Block in the juvenile hall a bit ago. They can’t cause any more trouble.”

“I-I see.” The person on the phone seemed relieved. “Then I’ll…”

“Yes,” she said peacefully. “The threat presented by Block is gone, so you’re no longer needed as their controller.”

She could hear a gulp from over the phone.



He started hurriedly going on about something, but she wasn’t listening anymore. Their discussion was over. She hung up and started walking through the crowd again.

She let go of one of the five balloons she was holding and it flew into the sky.

“Now then.”

She didn’t even bother to watch the disappearing balloon and toyed with the strings of the remaining balloons.

“I wonder what School’s controller will say.”

Chapter 4: The Paper-Thin Difference between Self Derision and Pride. *Enemy_Level5.*

Part 1

In the end, he let a river wash the ashes away.

Hamazura Shiage just couldn't throw them away in the automated kitchen waste device. He knew he had only satisfied himself in doing so and that it was polluting the environment, but he still resisted the idea of throwing what used to be a human in with the kitchen waste.

(…I'm terrible.)

He had parted with Takitsubo and was now thinking to himself while absentmindedly walking along a path on the riverside.

(I wasn't feeling for the person in the bag, I was just afraid that I could be next. I only did it because I didn't want to be disposed of that way when I died.)

"Damn it…"

He withstood the urge to ask himself if he really had to go back to Item and started back in their direction.

That was when someone called out to him.

Hamazura ignored the person and started to continue on, but the person grabbed his shoulder from behind.

Before he could turn around, a blow hit him.

He received damage to the back of his head and fell to the dirty ground.

He heard a laugh and looked over. He saw 3 boys he had never seen before. One of them was holding a golf club. He had been the one who had hit Hamazura.

(…!? Thieves?)

Eighty percent of Academy City's population was made up of students. At certain times, the student dorms were almost completely empty. There were some armed groups of delinquents who worked as thieves and used those times to their advantage.

"I was right. I've seen this guy before. He's from the District 7 Skill-Outs, right?"

"Weren't they destroyed?"

"Who cares? We're gonna kick his ass here."

With that they all laughed. Hamazura had kicks fly at him from all directions before he could say anything. They all did nothing but laugh.

"You know what, Skill-Out? Until just a bit ago, we had a hard time living from day to day."

"Your leader…Komaba, was it? He was a huge pain in the ass. He made it so we couldn't do our job very well."

"To make up for that, we're gonna fuck your face up so much they'll only be able to identify you as 'Boy A'. Understand?"

Hamazura wanted to say that that wasn't his fault, but a kick hit him the side. He had trouble breathing and couldn't speak.

(Damn…it…)

The unknown face within the sleeping bag came to his mind. He couldn't get the scene of the guy being burnt in the electric furnace and the ash being swept away in the river out of his mind. The fact that he too could be utterly eliminated that way and the triviality of a Level 0's life filled his head.

Then a metal pipe about the thickness of a thumb that was used for propane gas rolled along the dirty ground.

Hamazura Shiage did not hesitate.

“!!”

He grabbed the L-shaped pipe and swung it forcefully to the side.

It hit the piece of shit with the golf club in the ankle and Hamazura felt the guys’ bone crack. The idiot fell to the ground screaming and Hamazura stood up covered in blood as if to replace him. He swung the pipe down again getting another blow in.

The other two delinquents yelled something, but Hamazura ignored them.

He swung the pipe down yet again on the collapsed guy and pleasant screams entered his ears.

One of the other boys pulled a hammer out of his bag upon hearing that.

Hamazura thought he might seriously be in trouble. The metal pipe was quite destructive, but it was still difficult to knock someone out with it in one blow. If this turned into a drawn-out fist fight, it was possible they would take each other out.

But he still didn’t feel like stopping his attacking hands.

The feeling of the synthetic fabric of the black sleeping bag felt surprisingly fresh on his palm.

And then…

“Over here, Hamazura!!”

At the same time as that shout, the boy holding the hammer’s neck was knocked to the side with a crack. Before Hamazura realized the boy had been hit with something like a brick, someone had grabbed his arm.

“Come on, you idiot! Let’s get the hell outta here!!”

Hamazura felt oddly lethargic as he ran away while being dragged by the arm.

After being escorted away for a bit, he finally realized who that voice belonged to.

“Is that…Hanzou?”

It was a boy who had been a Skill-Out member along with him and had acted alongside him frequently. Hamazura thought about his former Skill-Out activities and concluded that Hanzou must have been thinking of stealing another ATM if he was wandering around this area.

Hanzou spoke in a completely shocked voice.

“You idiot! Did you completely forget the rules of the back alleys? If you get hung up on who wins and who loses, you end up dead. If you care about whether you live or die, you need to give up on always winning!”

The two boys looked behind to confirm that no one was pursuing them and stopped.

Hamazura looked at Hanzou’s face with a mystified expression on his own face.

“Why did you save me? I ruined Skill-Out and then ran out on the punishment.”

“That isn’t something for you to say,” responded Hanzou in an uninterested voice. “You need to realize that we don’t bear a grudge against you. We don’t think it was your fault. No matter who was the leader at that time, Skill-Out would have fallen.”

“…”

“It wasn’t a nice enough path to make me want to cling to the past. Well, I’ll admit it was pretty fun up through the part where I polished up the plan, you got us some assistance, and Komaba was leading the attack.”

“Yeah,” said Hamazura in an emotionless voice. “You’ve got a point. It was a shitty life, but it was fun.”

“…What are you going to do now?”

“I dunno. I get the feeling it’ll be pretty much the same no matter where I end up. Even if I went back to Skill-Out, it wouldn’t be like back then. I don’t think there’s any value in going back.”

Hamazura spat out those words and started to turn his back on Hanzou.

Hanzou took something out of this pocket and tossed it to Hamazura.

“Take it. From what happened back there, I’m guessing you don’t have much as far as weapons go.”

It was a small handgun that’s grip only made it halfway down his palm.

“…This is a lady’s gun.”

“Does it really matter? A weapon that’s a little hard to use is perfect. If it sits too comfortably in your hand, you’ll just shed unnecessary blood.”

Hamazura spun the gun around in his hand and put it away in his sleeve.

This time he left the alley without looking back at Hanzou.

His next job for Item was most likely waiting for him.

Part 2

Hamazura Shiage returned to one of Item’s hideouts.

“You’re late, Hamazura,” said Mugino Shizuri in a carefree way.

They were in a section of a high-rise building in District 3. It was a facility full of indoor leisure items like a sports gym and a pool. The grade of the users was fairly high. To even enter the building, one needed a member ID and the rank of one’s ID needed to be checked to use certain specific facilities. Apparently, it

was a major sign of status among the upper echelons of the city to be a member.

Hamazura and the others were in a VIP salon.

The individual rooms could be reserved on a yearly contract and only someone with a “Two Star” membership ranking or above could do so, so the room had a very upper class feel to it.

In the area that was called an individual room even though it was easily more spacious than a 3LDK, Mugino was sitting on a sofa.

Hamazura looked at who was gathered there and asked a puzzled question.

“Where’s Frenda?”

“Gone,” responded Mugino readily. “Dead or captured, I don’t know. And it doesn’t look like we’re going to have time to replace her, so Item will have to function with only three. Well, School is down to three too, so it works out. It won’t be hard to take the fight back to them, because we have Takitsubo.”

Mugino had said three.

Hamazura frowned at not being counted, but bringing it up wouldn’t accomplish anything.

“Hamazura. You’re hurt,” said Takitsubo while looking at his face.

“It’s nothing,” he replied. “What are you going to do now? School stole the Tweezers, right?”

“That’s right,” Mugino readily admitted. “That’s why it’s our turn to go on the attack. Takitsubo’s AIM Stalker can search for the location of any esper whose AIM diffusion field she has memorized. We fought them once in the particle engineering lab, so we can track them down. Item’s reason to exist is to stop the upper classes and the secret organizations from getting out of hand. Let’s do our job.”

Hamazura looked over at Takitsubo.

As usual, the girl had her arms and legs sprawled out limply. Perhaps her

insecure way of speaking was due to feeling the effects of others' AIM diffusion fields all the time.

"Is searching for Dark Matter fine?"

"Who's that?"

"The second Level 5. He's the bastard who leads School."

As Mugino answered Hamazura's question, Takitsubo took out a small case with a white powder in it.

Kinuhata looked at the clear case oddly.

"You have it super hard, Takitsubo-san. You can't even activate your power without Body Crystal."

"It's not so bad. This way actually seems normal to me," said Takitsubo as she ever so slightly licked the white powder.

Light returned to her eyes.

As if this was her normal state, Takitsubo Rikou stood up and stretched her back.

"Beginning AIM diffusion field search. Ending pick up of approximate and similar AIM diffusion fields. The results for the single AIM diffusion field will be reported. 5 seconds remaining until end of search."

She spoke like a machine.

And she came up with the correct response.

"Conclusion: Dark Matter is within this building."

Before everyone there could react in astonishment, something happened.

The door to the private salon was kicked in from the other side.

A single man walked in.

Seeing him, Mugino Shizuri spoke in annoyance.

“Dark Matter…!!”

“I’d prefer it if you called me by my name. It’s Kakine Teitoku by the way.”

The man had odd “claws” made of machines on his hand.

“The Tweezers…”

“Cool, ain’t it? I came here to declare my victory.”

“Ha. You’re just the Spare Plan who wasn’t chosen by Aleister. Just a bit ago, you were running away all over the place, but now you’re this confident?”

“Oh, right. I forgot to thank you for what you did back in the particle engineering lab. Thanks to you, I lost one of the 4 proper members of School.”

“Did you forget about the sniper we killed a few days ago? Did you replace him?”

The conversation between the two Level 5s suddenly cut off.

The cause was Kinuhata Saiai. She lifted up a nearby table in one hand without even getting up out of the sofa. The girl who looked only 12 took the table that was covered in decorations making it have to weigh a few dozen kilos and threw it forcefully at Kakine Teitoku.

There was a loud crash.

The table smashed to pieces, but Kakine’s expression did not change.

“That hurt,” he said so naturally it made you think he might be telling the truth. “And it pissed me off. I’m smashing you to pieces first.”

As expected, Kinuhata did not accept that.

She ran to the wall and destroyed the salon wall with her small fist. She then grabbed Hamazura and Takitsubo’s hands, winked at Mugino, and leapt through the broken wall.

On the other side was a similarly constructed luxurious salon. There were people in it, but Kinuhata knocked them out with her fist. When they exited into the

hallway, a man that looked like he was from School's subordinate organization was there, but she took him out with her fist, too.

Kinuhata Saiai did not have superhuman strength. Her power allowed her to freely control the nitrogen in the air. Her power was so exceedingly great that she could control compressed masses of nitrogen in order to lift up a car or even stop bullets. However, her effective range was very small. It only extended a few centimeters from her palm. This made it look like she was lifting things with her hand.

"Hamazura. Please go get us a car super fast," said Kinuhata. "One of reasons School is here is for Takitsubo. Since they knew where our hideout was, it's super safe to assume they know all our other information. Most likely, they found out what a problem Takitsubo-san's power would be for them and came here to take out our only way of tracking them."

"Her searching power?" said Hamazura.

Just from how destructive they looked, he thought they would be more worried about Mugino or Kinuhata…

"Even if they don't kill everyone in Item, our actions will be super restricted if they take Takitsubo-san out. Her presence or absence determines whether we are the chasers or the chased. If I were them, I would go for her first."

"…"

"On the other hand, this means that as long as Takitsubo-san is fine, we can turn this around. So get her in a car and take her super far away from here. If you hide somewhere that isn't one of Item's hideouts, it'll take them a while to find you."

As Kinuhata spoke, she took a stun gun out of her pocket.

She put it in Takitsubo's hand.

"The way you're always staring off into space is super dangerous, so at least have this as a weapon. And with this, you won't die if you accidentally set it off."

They heard an explosion.

It came from the salon Mugino and Kakine were in.

“Please go. You need to super hurry,” Kinuhata said as she pushed Hamazura and Takitsubo from behind.

Before he could say anything, the small girl ran off towards the battlefield.

Part 3

At the shock of an explosion, the entire building shook making it feel unreliable.

Kinuhata Saiai walked through the lobby of the indoor leisure facility as guests ran about in panic.

Some men from School’s subordinate organization lay collapsed on the floor. Kinuhata had knocked them out. She walked over next to them and kicked away their handguns and rifles.

Suddenly, her face blurred to the side.

By the time she realized she had taken a bullet, a few more blasts hit her and her small frame was knocked to the ground. She let her body go along with the force of the blast and slid behind a nearby pillar.

(…A sniper. Where?)

She had been hit in her head, her chest, and the bottom of her gut. All of them were vital areas. If it hadn’t been for the shield her power gave her, she would definitely have died. As she lay on the floor, she held one of the crushed bullets in her palm.

(A steel bullet…Is it that magnetic sniper rifle? Given how crushed the bullet is

and assuming its initial velocity was subsonic, the sniper must be at distance of 500 to 700.)

As she thought, Kinuhata reached a hand towards her pocket. What she held between her 5 fingers were metal rods about 30 cm long with masses of metal about the size of drink cans on the ends. They looked a little like maracas and little like hand grenades with old fashioned grips, but neither was the correct answer.

They were handheld anti-tank missile warheads.

The guests running around looked shocked and said something, but Kinuhata ignored them.

She pointed the various warheads held between her fingers away from her and grabbed the short strings on the back ends with her other hand. It was a similar gesture to using a party cracker and it was also similar to holding an arrow in a bow. She paused for a second and then jumped out from behind the pillar while looking at the scene beyond the broken window. When she did, she took a bullet right between the eyes, but she ignored it and readied her aim.

She pulled the strings without hesitating.

With the sound of air being released, the power of the compressed air took effect and the warheads flew from the handles. After advancing 10 meters, they ignited and quickly traveled the 500 meters while scattering flames about.

The multiple missiles hit the side of a building which exploded like crushed mille-feuille. The building must have been built to resist earthquakes, because it narrowly avoided completely collapsing.

“Ooh, nice. I guess that bastard Sunazara was blown to pieces along with the magnetic sniper rifle, huh? Well, he was brought in as a replacement on short notice, so I suppose I shouldn’t have expected too much of him.”

She heard a cheerful voice.

Kinuhata spun around just in time to see Dark Matter Kakine Teitoku walk out of the hallway.

“Ah, so you’re a remnant of the Dark May Project. What a pain. That was where they saw how Accelerator’s calculation pattern worked and tried to optimize specific espers’ Personal Realities, right?”

“…”

“And as a result, you got an automatic defense power. Although, it seems you were originally an atmosphere control type. It’s just like with Accelerator’s reflection, but your limit is automatically opening a defensive field around you with your power. Have you ever thought about how pathetic that is?”

“Not really,” quickly responded Kinuhata. “I’m super happy compared to test subjects from Produce. They had their brains chopped up like a Christmas cake in order to figure out where in their brains their Personal Realities lay.”

“I see,” said Kakine with no real interest.

Kinuhata cautiously watched the man in front of her and opened her mouth.

“What happened to Mugino?”

“Oh, nothing really,” was his short reply.

And with that Kinuhata knew. A Level 4 like her couldn’t stand up to someone who had dealt with the 4th most powerful Level 5 in Academy City so easily. When they had fought in the particle engineering laboratory, she had gotten a rough idea, but now she had proof.

“So where is AIM Stalker? That’s all I want to know. If you tell me where she is, I can just let you go.”

“Do you really think anyone would be stupid enough to go along with that?”

“Yes. There’s Frenda from Item for example.”

“…”

“I’m just letting you know that you have that option. And just so you know, you can’t defeat my Dark Matter with Level 4 Offense Armor. I’m not someone you can defeat with some ingenious plan or something.”

Kinuhata did not say anything.

Kakine spoke again to the girl who was silently staring at him.

“Where is AIM Stalker?”

“It seems I don’t have the right to refuse you…” said Kinuhata with a small smile on her face.

As she spoke, she grabbed a nearby bench and threw it.

But…

An unidentifiable explosion appeared with Kakine at its center.

The bench was blown to pieces and even Kinuhata was blown away.

Her small body flew through the air 10 meters before landing. She broke through the thin wall and into some room.

Watching that, Kakine smiled thinly.

“So you weighed your pride against your death. That’s sentimental but not realistic.”

Kakine ordered a man from the subordinate organization to retrieve her.

“Retrieve her? …You mean she’s still alive?”

“That’s the kind of esper she is.”

Part 4

Hamazura Shiage and Takitsubo Rikou ran down the elevator hall.

He pressed the switch on the wall and the light indicating that the elevator was stopped on the 48th floor quickly lowered to the 25th floor they were on. While it did, Hamazura took the unlocking tools from his pocket.

(…The parking lot is underground. Everyone around here will have fancy cars, but I don't have the time to be indecisive. I'll go for the car nearest to the elevator.)

The elevator stopped on the 25th floor.

With a light electronic tone, the automatic metal door opened to the left and the right.

"Ah, there they are."

Hamazura heard a voice that crushed all his hope.

A certain man from School was walking from the hallway. The second Level 5 who had defeated Mugino Shizuri slowly approached them with those odd claws on his hand.

"I was looking for you. I really was. You're the search esper, right?"

As he spoke, the man took the thing he was dragging with his left hand and tossed it towards them. It flew a few meters through the air and landed at Hamazura's feet. It was the person they had split up with just a bit ago, Kinuhata Saiai.

"…!!"

"She made the right decision. The core of Item isn't the Level 5; it's you. It'd be pretty bad if you got away now, y'know?"

The implication behind Kakine Teitoku's words was that they couldn't get away now that he was there.

Each step forward he took was a countdown towards the end of Hamazura and Takitsubo's lives.

Hamazura thought of the handgun in his sleeve. He looked at the open elevator

next to him and spoke to Takitsubo in as quiet a voice as he could.

“(…Get on the elevator and go down.)”

“(…But Hamazura.)”

“(….Even if could I get away from School here by abandoning you, Item would be destroyed! Fuck, I’m stuck between a rock and a hard place!!)”

Kakine Teitoku stopped walking.

He was indecisive, but not over whether to let them go. They were already within the effective range of the Level 5’s attacks.

“Well, what are you going to do? How long is it going to take for you to say goodbye?”

“…!! Go!!”

Hamazura shoved Takitsubo’s small body into the elevator.

However, Takitsubo reached out for Hamazura.

They spun around, reversing positions almost as if in a ballroom dance, and Takitsubo pushed Hamazura into the elevator. Hamazura was confused by the sudden action and he fell down to the floor right on his ass.

Takitsubo’s hand was the only part of her in the elevator.

She hit the B1 button that would take the elevator to the underground parking lot.

“What the hell are you-…?”

“I’m sorry, Hamazura.”

Takitsubo looked at him from the other side of the closing door.

“I told everyone about what you said by the furnace. I don’t want you to become ash like that.”

There was a slight smile in her eyes.

“Don’t worry. I’m a Level 4 and you’re a Level 0. So I’ll protect you, Hamazura.”

“…!!”

Before he could say anything, the door completely closed and the high-speed elevator started moving down. Something horrible had happened, but his body felt oddly relaxed because he had escaped the danger to himself.

As he sat on the floor with his back to the wall, Hamazura stared up at the ceiling.

(But I thought espers didn’t care about the life of someone like me…) thought Hamazura as he felt the characteristic floating feeling that high-speed elevators gave.

He covered his face with a hand as he stared up at the ceiling.

(I thought we were like a bunch of disposable convenience store umbrellas. So if I died, I wouldn’t just be burnt to ash in a furnace and thrown away with the kitchen trash?)

“Damn it,” Hamazura muttered.

Most likely, he hadn’t been the only one that underwent a shock when he was burning that black sleeping bag in the electric furnace. The girl watching from behind had felt the same shock as he had. Perhaps Takitsubo Rikou had always tried to protect the Level 0s or maybe the furnace incident had given her a change of heart.

Either way, there was only one thing that could be said.

Takitsubo Rikou had faced the man ranked 2nd in Academy City all on her own in order to save Hamazura, a Level 0.

“…Fuck that,” muttered Hamazura Shiage as he slowly stood up with a hand on the wall. “Fuck thaaaattt!!”

He slammed his palm onto the button on the wall to stop the elevator.

Hamazura gritted his teeth and took a long, deep breath.

Truthfully speaking, he had no real expectation of winning. That Kakine guy was a Level 5 and he wasn't even the only enemy. At the very least, there were also a few men dressed all in black who looked like they were from the subordinate organization.

But…

"Is there a place for Level 0s? Of course there is! Is there a path for them other than preying on others? Of course there is!!"

The words of a Level 0 who was completely different from him who he had run into at the Dangai University database center naturally came to the surface of his mind.

"If you had only used the strength it took to form Skill-Out and used it to help those weaker than you, things would have changed for you!! If you had only used that strength you used to fight back against powerful espers to help those in need, the people of Academy City would have accepted you!!"

"…Yeah."

Hamazura Shiage pressed the button for the 25th floor where he had parted with Takitsubo and the elevator door closed.

"*That's exactly right, you piece of shit.* "

He cut off his own path of escape and returned the battlefield where a Level 5 awaited.

Part 5

The elevator stopped on the 25th floor.

Hamazura exited through the automatic door that opened to the left and right and what he saw was the scene he had expected to see.

“Oh, you came back?”

The one who lightly said that was Kakine Teitoku, the Level 5 from School.

Near him, Kinuhata Saiai lay on the ground looking exactly the way she had when he had left.

But now Takitsubo Rikou lay face down by the unscathed man’s feet so he couldn’t see her face. He couldn’t even tell if she was alive or dead.

Kakine continued to speak as he cracked his neck.

“Well, she did pretty well considering that she had no direct battle power. She must have used her search power to interfere with my AIM diffusion field and then ‘reversed the flow’ in an attempt to take control of my power. Really, if she grew some more she could even become the 8th.”

Every one of his comments of praise made it sound like he was mocking her.

Hamazura did not say anything in return. Instead, he took the handgun hidden in his sleeve and thrust it forward.

“Oh, you aren’t done?” came a sudden voice.

A girl in a showy dress came walking from around a corner behind Kakine.

(It’s that crane woman!!)

For a second, Hamazura couldn’t decide who to aim the gun at. But…

“You should stop that.”

With those words, Hamazura Shiage couldn’t move his body.

“It was necessary to kill you before, but now that we have the Tweezers, there’s

no need to kill someone from their subordinate organization.”

(…!?)

It wasn’t that his body had become paralyzed for some reason. There was no problem with his body physically. It was just that a “sense” that he couldn’t shoot even if he wanted to grew up unnaturally within him.

It was the same way he wouldn’t be able to crush a napping cat under his foot.

It was the same way he wouldn’t be able to kill a sick kid and steal everything the kid had.

It was the same way he wouldn’t be able to turn his gun on Takitsubo Rikou.

“From the look on your face, you must be fairly kind on the inside. I should have just used my power from the get-go.”

A broad smile appeared on the girl in the dress’s face.

“My Measure Heart can freely regulate the distance between people’s hearts. What do you think will happen if I set it to the distance of the various people you know?”

“Kh…!!”

(What is this? An application of Telepathy!?)

“How about you stop. Currently I’m at a distance of 20. In other words, I’m keeping it at the same heart distance as ‘Hamazura Shiage – Takitsubo Rikou’. You can’t shoot me the same way you wouldn’t be able to shoot Takitsubo. If you were willing to come back for her, you would never hurt her, right?”

His hand holding the gun was shaking.

He couldn’t shoot. He knew Takitsubo and the girl in the dress were two different people, but he just couldn’t do it.

That was when Kakine spoiled her fun by breaking in.

“How boring. You make it seem like we’re the bad guys here.”

“A guy and a girl protecting each other like this is such a moving story. It’s such a rare sight that it makes me not want to destroy it.”

“Yes, it is unfortunate that the girl is going to die on her own regardless of what we do.”

Hamazura gave a start upon hearing those words.

“What…? What the hell did you just say!?”

Kakine kicked the clear case that had fallen next to Takitsubo over to Hamazura.

“It’s this Body Crystal. Did you know she was using it?”

“She was…using it to activate her power…”

“Strictly speaking, it intentionally causes a rejection that causes an esper’s power to go out of control. If you want to get into the details, it was used to induce an explosion of an esper’s power in experiments to analyze how out-of-control powers work. Most of the time, it’s just a bad thing, but in rare cases the out-of-control state is actually quite useful. She must have been one of those kinds of espers.”

Kakine was explaining it all in a voice that showed how tedious he found it.

“In the state she’s in, she won’t last long. If she never used her power again, she’d be fine, but she’ll be destroyed if she uses it one or two more times.”

Destroyed. Hamazura’s face stiffened at that disturbing word. Kakine ignored him and continued.

“We don’t even need to finish her off. If she doesn’t have her search power, I don’t care if she dies or not.”

“Just so you know, she collapsed on her own,” said the girl in the dress. “It’s because she forced herself to keep using Body Crystal in order to fight us in this building. If we had seriously attacked her, there wouldn’t have been even a scrap of flesh left.”

Hamazura stared at them without moving much, but he still managed to ignore

the two members of School and press the elevator button.

“Now then, what to do?” asked Kakine simply as Hamazura waited for the elevator. “Should I kill her or let her go?”

“We can just leave her alone, right? A member of Item on the verge of destruction can’t stop us.”

Hamazura ground his teeth when the girl in the dress said “on the verge of destruction”, but he still couldn’t pull the trigger. He was completely trapped by her Measure Heart power.

“But it would be easier to kill her.”

“That search esper used your AIM to mess up your Personal Reality, right? Shouldn’t you check on that? Your power going out of control would be much more dangerous than a half-defeated member of Item. And I’d rather not die from an ally who went out of control.”

Kakine Teitoku cracked his neck in dislike of being ordered around.

Kakine did not have a gun because of how much confidence he had in his power. But if his powers did go out of control, he would be the first person to get caught up in it.

“Fine, let’s leave. Checking is easy enough, but we don’t have the equipment here.”

With perfect timing, the elevator arrived.

“Damn it!!” yelled Hamazura as he used his thumb to bring down the handgun’s hammer.

But the girl in the dress’s expression did not change.

“I’m currently at distance 20. It’s the same heart distance as 'Hamazura Shiage – Takitsubo Rikou'. But I can lessen that distance.”

“!!”

“You don’t want your true feelings to be painted over with lies, do you? You should share the joy of living on with that dying girl.”

The two got on the stopped elevator and the automatic door closed.

Hamazura looked down at the case of Body Crystal at his feet and at Takitsubo Rikou who still wasn’t moving. He then slowly sat down.

(After using her power one or two more times, Takitsubo will be destroyed…)

An idiot delinquent like Hamazura did not know specifically what that “destruction” entailed. But he could guess it was nothing good.

(What do I do?)

Hamazura stared at Takitsubo’s face. Her body did not even twitch. She showed no sign of waking. She must have been going through a lot because she was covered in an unpleasant sweat.

Takitsubo Rikou had fought Kakine to the point that this happened to her.

Most likely she did it in order to save Hamazura Shiage.

And she had used something called Body Crystal to do it.

(…)

Hamazura gritted his teeth silently.

He wasn’t prepared for this and he had nothing so refined as determination. Even so, he had obtained something that gave him the motivating force to move his arms and legs.

“Damn it…”

He couldn’t return Takitsubo Rikou to Item. That organization was made so it could easily replace a member if one disappeared. Even in her precarious state, Takitsubo would most likely be made to use her power.

Hamazura put the ladies’ hand gun back in his sleeve with a shaking hand. He took the magazine out and checked how many shots he had. Maybe it was

because the clip had been made to be short, but he didn't have many. No, even if he had thousands upon thousands of bullets, it probably wouldn't be enough to get through this. The dark side of Academy City would pursue Takitsubo and even Item would become an enemy. Could he fight them?

"God fucking damn it!!"

Even so, he had to do it.

If Takitsubo continued to use her power, it would truly be over.

That was when Kinuhata who was collapsed next to Takitsubo looked over at him without moving a finger. It seemed she had figured out what was going on from Hamazura's impatient demeanor.

"…Well, that's the right answer. Take Takitsubo-san and disappear."

"Thanks."

"I didn't say it for thanks. I was speaking ill of you. We don't need super useless people like you and Takitsubo-san in Item so I'm telling you to get out of our way."

As she spoke, there was a slight smile on Kinuhata's lips.

She wasn't unscathed. There was blood spilling from her mouth. And yet she smiled while watching Hamazura act on Takitsubo's behalf.

"Is there any last thing I can do for you?"

"…Hmm. Use Code 52 to contact the subordinate organization and call in the information suppression team and an ambulance. As you can see, I super can't move."

"Will do," said Hamazura.

It was painful leaving Kinuhata like that, but he had to take Takitsubo and flee.

(Anyway, as long as she doesn't use her power, it'll be fine. She'll have to retire from Item, but that's better than being destroyed.)

As Hamazura thought, his cell phone suddenly began ringing.

It was from Mugino Shizuri.

“Haaamazuraaa. Is Takitsubo Rikou there?”

“…Are you okay!? You fought Kakine, right? What happ-…!?”

“Oh, shut up. It’s time for our counterattack on School. We need to use Takitsubo’s power to track them. If she’s there, bring her here. *She’ll give us an answer even if it kills her*.”

Part 6

Hamazura left the building while carrying Takitsubo on his back while she was as motionless as a corpse. He wasn’t following Mugino Shizuri’s instructions to force her to use her power. He was doing the opposite. He was trying to get as far away as he could in order to keep Takitsubo away from Item.

He was on top of a short bridge. There was a train track below it, not a river. It was one of the places where the underground line briefly came above ground. On the other side of the bridge was a sports car.

“I don’t really know what’s going on, but I’m going to be taking that girl?”

The one speaking was Yomikawa Aiho of Anti-Skill who had gotten out of the car and had her hands on her hips in shock.

The routes Hamazura or Takitsubo would use to escape and the places they would hide were the same as Item’s, so Mugino would find them easily. He decided that meant he just had to hand her over to someone with completely different “routes”.

“Hamazura, you know what my job is, right? I’m in Anti-Skill. Do you really think I’m going to let you run off after handing me an unconscious girl in this obviously suspicious situation?”

“…Shut up,” said Hamazura as he gritted his teeth.

Yomikawa frowned at the impatient tone to his voice that was unusual for him.

“I’ll explain it all to you later. I’ll show up wherever you want me to! Just take her somewhere safe as quickly as you can!! She isn’t in a good state. She’s been using something called Body Crystal. I don’t understand it at all, but apparently she could be destroyed at any time!!”

“Body Crystal…? Wait, Hamazura. Did you just say Body Crystal!?”

Yomikawa’s expression completely changed after hearing that term, but Hamazura didn’t explain further.

It was hardly the time.

“…Haaamazuraaa.”

Suddenly, a voice came from behind him.

He spun around and saw Mugino Shizuri standing blood-covered on the other side of the bridge. Some of it was her blood, but some was from someone else. He recognized the thing that she was dragging in her right hand that looked a bit like an old rag.

“Frenda…”

Technically, it was only her upper half.

Wherever it had gone, her bottom half was gone and something dark red was dripping from the cross-section.

“That’s right. It seems she was afraid of School so she betrayed Item and then hid. So I had to do a little purging. …What are you doing? You don’t need any purging, do you?”

Mugino let go and Frenda fell to the ground.

She didn’t even look towards Frenda.

In the end, that was all Frenda was – all a comrade was – to Mugino.

Hamazura’s face stiffened upon seeing what, unlike Takitsubo, was clearly a corpse. Even so, he did not hesitate. He gave the girl on his back to Yomikawa and spoke quietly.

“…Please go.”

“Hamazura. As I said, I’m in Anti-Skill. I can’t have a child shielding me h-...”

“Go!!” yelled Hamazura cutting her off. “I know you can’t ignore a murder case, but she’s well beyond that level! I can’t get into the details, but Frenda was fairly skilled herself. That woman is someone who could kill her in one blow! That’s why I’m telling you to take Takitsubo and go!!”

After saying that, Hamazura looked at the unconscious Takitsubo with an expression that looked like it was about to collapse.

“Please… I don’t want her to die. I could never make up my mind, but I finally know that that’s what I want to do. So please go. I can’t protect her alone. Without your help, I’ll lose everything here!!”

“Hamazura…”

“Do you really think you can do anything on your own!? She’s a Level 5. She’s the terrible monster who’s ranked 4th in Academy City! I’ll buy you some time, so please take Takitsubo and get out of here!!”

He yelled to the point that he thought his throat would be torn to pieces. Yomikawa had her breath taken away at how desperate he was. She hesitated, but she finally nodded as if the light in Hamazura’s eyes was compelling her.

“Once I get that girl to a safe place, I’ll come back with a fully armed Anti-Skill team. So don’t die until I’m back.”

“…Sure,” Hamazura responded.

Yomikawa shook off her hesitation, got in the driver's seat, and stepped on the gas. Her sports car drove off at high speed with Takitsubo on board.

Hamazura heard a whistle.

He turned to look and saw Level 5 Mugino Shizuri approaching as she crossed the small bridge.

"A battle with your life on the line. A numbing feeling, isn't it, Hamazura?"

"I…" he started to say.

As she approached, Mugino casually swung her hand to the side. It hit Hamazura and he flew to the side and the metal guardrail sunk into his gut with a dull noise. The great shock gave him the urge to vomit. It felt like strength was going to leave his arms and legs and he lay sprawled over the railing like a futon hung out to dry. He could see the railroad running below the bridge.

"Quiet. I didn't ask your opinion."

Ignoring Hamazura's groans, Mugino made it completely across the bridge.

That hadn't been her Level 5 power. It was just the strength of her arm. She had purposefully used her physical strength so that it wasn't something that could be explained as being the difference between a Level 5 and a Level 0.

Mugino still hadn't given up. Even if it destroyed Takitsubo, she was going to find out where School was.

"Ha ha," laughed Hamazura as he lay sprawled out on the railing. "Should you really be finishing me off right now?"

"Ah?"

Mugino looked over at him with just her eyes in an irritated way.

Then her eyes widened.

In Hamazura Shiage's hand was the case of Body Crystal that Takitsubo Rikou used.

“She needs this to use AIM Stalker, right?”

“You bastard, that’s…!!”

As obvious rage entered Mugino’s eyes, Hamazura jumped over the metal railing and off of the bridge.

A train was passing by underneath at that exact moment.

Hamazura's body struck the roof of the train. He had imagined the roof as being flat, but it actually had quite a few ups and downs from the air conditioners installed on it. His body rolled around when he landed, his skin was torn like it was being scraped off with a file, and he almost fell off because he couldn't rid his body of momentum. Even so, he finally managed to brace himself and stop.

Sprawled out on top of the train, Hamazura smiled.

(I managed to get through it. Without this Body Crystal, Takitsubo can't use her power. She doesn't have to be forced to fight now. As long as I can keep this from Mugino…)

That was when the train suddenly stopped.

Hamazura's body slid across the roof. He managed to stop himself and then looked around in surprise. He saw Mugino standing a good way back on the track. She must have jumped from the bridge just as he had. Her hand was stuck deep in the ground. The power cables for Academy City railroads ran through the ground. Mugino had used her power to sever the power cable in order to stop the train.

From a few hundred meters away, Mugino Shizuri said something.

Hamazura couldn't hear her voice, but he understood it from the movements of her mouth.

I – am – going – to – fucking – kill – you.

Part 7

From atop the train, Hamazura took in what Mugino had said.

The Level 5 who had forcibly stopped the train smiled so it looked like her face was split in two.

“…!!”

All of the hair on Hamazura’s body stood on end. He hurriedly got down from the roof of the train and ran across the gravel. He was surrounded on the left and right by concrete walls making the area almost like an artificial river, but he found a set of metal stairs partway along. He ran up those stairs and into the above ground road.

He turned around.

Mugino was climbing the stairs a bit away. She was 20 or 30 meters away and staring at him through the crowd of people. She had already singled out Hamazura Shiage as her prey.

(Shit!! I can’t get away by mixing in with the crowd!!)

He cut through the large crowd of people out on their day off and continued to run. But he soon reached his limit. He looked around and headed for one of the nearby buildings. He slammed open the door with a tackle, not even bothering to check if it was locked or not, and tumbled inside.

“…Damn it. What is this place?”

It wasn’t a normal business building. There were plants slightly taller than Hamazura growing all over the floor. Above his head, wires were laid out entwined with the branches. They were grape vines. Looking to the ground, he could see hydroponic containers lined up. The bluish purple illumination must have been from UV lights to promote photosynthesis.

(So this is an automatic refining plant for biological ethanol fuel…)

The development of biological ethanol fuel was being done as an alternative to gasoline. Normally sugarcane or corn was used, but, since something with a low alcohol purity rate like grapes was being used, this must be a high grade product that stressed the brand. Apparently, the celebs in District 3 wanted to even have a distinction between the fuel they put in their cars and the fuel normal people put in their cars. It was like they were letting their cars drink wine.

“What a nice place.”

Hamazura’s entire body stiffened when he heard that voice come from behind him.

“You’ve got taste to choose a deserted facility, Hamazura. It’s best to die alone.”

Before he could turn around, an impact hit his back.

With a loud disconcerting noise, Hamazura’s body flew a few meters before it landed. A large number of the hydroponic containers were knocked over, many grape plants were broken, and Hamazura’s body rolled even farther.

In that one attack, a pain so intense he thought he was going to die attacked his entire body.

It was actually surprising that he didn’t suffer any broken bones.

“Fuck…!!”

Hamazura left the large area as if he were dragging his hurting body. There was a staircase, so he headed up it. He found a large group of silver machinery that was twice his height lined up and they were connected vertically and horizontally by metal pipes. It was like the beer breweries you sometimes saw in commercials. In actuality, the grapes were fermented to bring out the alcohol, so the equipment worked in a similar way. There also had to be equipment to create a high concentration of alcohol to turn it into car fuel.

Compared to before, there were a lot of blind spots.

(Even if she is a Level 5, she isn’t invincible.)

Hamazura passed through a gap in the complicated arrangements of pipes and leaned his back up against a piece of machinery about the size of a small room. As he did, he hurriedly tried to come up with anything that gave him an advantage.

(When we were attacked by the mobile crane near the particle engineering lab, she didn’t try to destroy the wrecking ball with her power. And with the train just now she went for the power cables buried in the ground instead of the fast-

moving train itself.)

Hamazura gritted his teeth at the pain all over his body and noticed a means of getting out of this situation.

(Most likely, Mugino Shizuri's power takes a certain amount of time to aim in exchange for how powerful it is. In other words, she's weak to surprise attacks. She can't deal with a sudden attack from someone.)

That wasn't because Mugino hadn't trained her power enough, but rather it was a flaw created from it being *too* powerful. If she wasn't extremely careful in using her power in only a specified area, she could end up getting caught up in the blast.

But he didn't really care about the reason behind it as long as it was a demerit for her.

In an area with lots of cover, Hamazura Shiage had a slight chance of victory.

But…

"Haaamazuraaa."

With that one word, Hamazura's body was covered in a sense of danger.

He ignored his theory and got down on the ground and at the same time "that" came.

A rain of beams flew by.

With the woman known as Mugino Shizuri at the center, lines of bright, unhealthy-looking light shot out in all directions. They weren't special electron beams shot out with the force of a lightning strike. Just like light, electrons have the properties of both particles and waves, but Mugino had the power to forcibly control electrons that remained in that "ambiguous" state.

When electrons that were fixed in that ambiguous state struck an object, they couldn't decide whether to react as a particle or as a wave, so they would "stop" there. Normally, electrons had a mass that was incredibly close to zero, but that "stopping" created a false wall that caused a dreadful amount of destructive

force to be strike the target at the speed with which it hit that wall.

That was Meltdowner.

The technical classification was Particle Waveform High-Speed Cannon.

Unlike the #3 Railgun, she was a Level 5 who manipulated electrons without using waves or particles.

Each one of the beams tore through the metal like it was paper, melted the thick walls, and tinted everything orange. The heat must have reached the refined alcohol, because small explosions occurred all over the place. Hamazura had somehow managed to avoid being directly hit, but a metal fragment the size of a guitar pick was stuck in his left shoulder. And it wasn't just that one. There were 4 or 5 of them stuck there.

"Gwaaah!!"

Holding his bloody shoulder, Hamazura unintentionally yelled out.

Since the areas for cover were in her way, Mugino was just going to destroy them all. Once she had leveled everything to rubble, Hamazura would have to face Mugino in a hopeless situation.

"The machinery here is like that thing in the goldfish scooping games at festivals. Umm…I forget what it's called. Anyway, it won't cut it as cover against my Meltdowner."

Number 4 in Academy City.

The group of machinery that had been covering the floor just a bit before had been reduced to rubble in just one attack. Every kind of cover had been crushed and even the outer wall had been greatly damaged. Mugino stood in the center of the destruction that could easily bring the entire building down as a smile slowly, slowly spread across her face.

"Those fucking scientists said that my survival instinct keeps me from putting out any more force than that, but apparently it was originally enough to kill Railgun instantly. Well, I can't complain too much, since they say that the recoil would blow my body to pieces if I actually did it."

Fear spread through Hamazura Shiage’s body.

The Level 5 monster quietly approached him.

Part 8

An overwhelming amount of destruction had been fired by Mugino Shizuri’s Meltdowner.

Hamazura turned his back to the wreckage and ran frantically trying to get as much distance between himself and her as he could.

He ran to a different floor of the botanical ethanol fuel plant and Mugino called out to him.

“Hamazuraaa. Quit getting in my way and hand over the Body Crystal and Takitsubo. I won’t be satisfied until I’ve killed everyone in School.”

While still fleeing, Hamazura rejected Mugino’s words.

“No. I won’t let Takitsubo use Body Crystal any more. She’s at her limit.”

“So what? If Takitsubo breaks down, we can just replace her with some other esper. She’s the only one that can search for an AIM diffusion field, but another kind of esper would be fine, too. As long as I find out where those School fuckers are, there’s no problem.”

Hamazura made it to the floor where the remnants of the grapes that had all the alcohol squeezed out of them were collected, but Mugino’s Meltdowner turned it all to rubble in seconds.

Hamazura spoke while hiding behind a mountain of metal that was tinged with heat.

“Sorry, but I’m not going to go along with what you want.”

“Ah?”

“You can’t defeat that Kakine guy. With the battle in the particle engineering lab and this last one, *you’ve run away from him twice now*.”

After saying that, he almost thought he heard the sound of Mugino gritting her teeth.

Even so, he continued.

“After meeting him myself, I can tell. This isn’t an issue of #4 vs. #2. Most likely, you’re losing to Kakine Teitoku in a different way. What good will finding out where he is do?”

It was true that School was made up of horrible people, but they still had enough humanity to let those of lower rank go. Even when Takitsubo used up all her strength before their very eyes, they didn’t finish her off.

He didn’t think that someone like Mugino Shizuri, who bared her fangs towards her own comrades just because she didn’t like something, was “stronger” than Kakine and the rest of School. No matter how overwhelming her power seemed, that impression was not shaken from him.

“This isn’t an issue of winning or losing. If you fought risking your life and won, all you would get would be personal satisfaction. I can’t let Takitsubo go along with that. I won’t let you end her life for something so pointless!”

“Ha. Ha ha!!”

Hearing the answer Hamazura Shiage had come to, Mugino laughed scornfully.

Hamazura ran from cover to cover putting some distance between them as Mugino slowly pursued him.

“How did she draw you in, Hamazura? Did you fall for her cute face? Or was it because she spoke kindly to a Level 0 like you?”

Hamazura did not respond and Mugino’s smile grew stronger.

“How stupid. Do you really think everyone who speaks kindly to you is a good person and everyone who speaks harshly to you is a bad person!? You make it sound like you stand at the very center of the world!!”

“…I know that,” said Hamazura.

He didn’t deny it.

If Takitsubo Rikou hadn’t spoken kindly to him, he doubted his heart would have led him to do what he did.

“But she said she didn’t want a selfish bastard like me to die. She’s the kind of person who says things like that! Someone like her needs to be happy. It isn’t people like you or me that should stand above everyone else. If we don’t create a society where the kind idiots stand at the top guiding everyone else, this shitty world will never get any better!!”

No response came.

A white beam so bright it made him think it was a nuclear explosion blew straight through the mountain of metal Hamazura was hiding behind. He was knocked back by the gust of wind created and he sensed a presence standing right behind him.

Before he could turn around, he sensed something odd about his right ear.

Mugino Shizuri had stuck a screwdriver in his ear.

“It seems you’ve got a screw that’s just a liiiitle loose in your head.”

The tip of the screwdriver slowly moved further into his ear.

“Want me to tighten it for you?”

He couldn’t move. If he moved his head even slightly, the inside of his ear would be damaged and bloody. While holding the screwdriver in place, Mugino put her empty left hand in front of Hamazura palm up. She was telling him to hand over the Body Crystal.

Hamazura put his hand in his pocket.

The clear case of Body Crystal was there.

(God damn it…)

Gritting his teeth and closing his eyes, Hamazura Shiage prepared himself.

He ignored the screwdriver and forcefully spun around.

Part 9

Hamazura ignored the screwdriver in his ear and forcefully spun around.

“Wha-…?”

Unsurprisingly, Mugino seemed a bit shocked.

The screwdriver carved into the inside of his ear. An extremely intense pain exploded in his head and the sound from his right ear became muffled as if he had an earplug in it. On top of that, half of his vision became slightly tinged red for some reason.

Ignoring it all, Hamazura pulled the case of Body Crystal from his pocket.

It was a small rectangular case much like a mechanical pencil lead case.

Gripping it tightly, he used the corner of the case to cut at Mugino’s nearby face.

Mugino’s right eye was crushed at once much like a pirate captain’s.

“Gh…ooooooooooooohhhhhhhhhhhh!!”

She held her red, wet face with both hands and tottered backwards.

Seeing that, Hamazura gave a silent smile.

“A Level 0 ear for a Level 5 eye, huh? …That’s a pretty good deal, dontcha think?”

With those words, Mugino’s face was dyed with rage.

“Hamazuraaaaaaa!!”

A bright flash swelled up.

Mugino Shizuri’s left arm was blown away from the wrist to the elbow as if it had melted. The bright light it caused was aimed for Hamazura Shiage’s face. She shot Meltdowner ignoring any kind of detailed aiming.

“…!!”

Hamazura swung his head to the side right before it hit.

It was only pure chance that he had managed to avoid that overwhelming attack.

Mugino stretched out her bloody right arm, shoved down Hamazura who had already lost his balance, and climbed on top of him. The Body Crystal case slipped from Hamazura’s hand and clattered as it slid across the ground, but Mugino wasn’t paying any attention to it anymore.

She stared at Hamazura’s face with her remaining left eye and yelled in a voice filled with rage.

“That has nothing to do with this!! That has nothing to fucking do with thiiiiiisssss!! An ear!? An eye!? You can tear off my arms and legs and crush my organs, but you can’t change the difference between our strengths! I’m a Level 5! I’m #4! I’m Meltdowner! Don’t get so pleased with yourself, you motherfucker! I can kill a Level 0 like you 100 times without moving a fingeeeerrrrr!!”

Foam sprayed from her mouth and Mugino grabbed Hamazura by the neck with her right hand. If she activated her power now, Hamazura’s head would certainly be annihilated.

Hamazura Shiage smiled as his neck was being held like a drink can.

He relaxed as if he had given up on something.

“…Y’know, I’m not an idiot. I knew it would end up like this.” Hamazura said while listening to Mugino’s erratic breathing. “You’re the kind of person that can’t stand it when you can’t complete a video game without 100% accuracy. If you fuck up even slightly, you fly into a rage and won’t accept it even if you complete the game.”

“Ah?”

“When someone like that fucks up even slightly, they find another goal in order to write it off. When you aren’t able to get 100% accuracy, you instead go for a high score and are satisfied with that. …There was no reason to get so obsessed with a Level 0 like me. You could have used the Level 5 power you’re so proud of to pick me off at a distance.”

“In other words,” Hamazura smiled as he spoke, “that ridiculous obsession with victory left a decisive opening for me.”

A metallic noise rang out.

It was the sound of the ladies handgun flying out of Hamazura Shiage’s sleeve as he stretched out his arm.

“Wha-…?”

Before Mugino could say anything, Hamazura pulled the trigger.

Bang bang bang!! With that dry sound, multiple holes opened up in her upper body. Hamazura continued pulling the trigger until he was out of bullets and even continued moving his index finger for a bit once the clip was empty.

“…”

Mugino looked down at her bloody body in shock.

Before long, she wobbled to the side, collapsed, and stopped moving.

“That was too easy, Level 5,” said Hamazura while got up as if he were dragging his battered body.

He picked up the case of Body Crystal that had fallen to the floor and put it back in his pocket.

If Hamazura Shiage had initially pulled out the handgun, he wouldn't have won. She would have used her power to easily defend against it. That was why it had been necessary for him to wait until the very last second to do so. He hadn't even taken out the gun when she stuck the screwdriver in his ear because he was getting her to lower her guard by making her think he didn't have any proper weapons.

Previously, the leader of Skill-Out, Komaba Ritoku, had gotten a step away from taking the life of Academy City's strongest Level 5 by sealing his power. Hamazura had done the same thing.

He stuck his pinky finger into his injured right ear.

His ear drum didn't seem to be damaged. He pulled out a clump of blood plugging the ear and his hearing improved a little.

"…Damn, that really was a good deal," he said in shock and started to leave.

"…mazura."

A shock ran down Hamazura's back when he heard that voice ring out from the depths of hell.

He slowly turned around and…

"Hamazuraaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!!"

The woman with dark red holes all over her body, her left arm up to her left elbow gone, and her right eye crushed forcefully stood up. An overly unhealthy-looking white light was gathering around her right hand. She was most likely looping the particle waveform high-speed cannon in her hand. One hit by that attack would definitely blow Hamazura away.

There were no bullets left in the ladies handgun in his right hand.

That was why Hamazura didn't rely on the gun.

“Ooooooohhhhhhhhh!!”

Throwing away the gun, he unhesitatingly ran towards Mugino.

Their arms crossed.

If he had hesitated even slightly, it would have created an opening.

If there had been the slightest opening, death would have come through it.

But Hamazura Shiage was resolute. He merely forcefully came in, clenched his fist like stone, focused on the face of the enemy he needed to defeat, and attacked with his strongest strike.

A tremendous noise rang out.

Strength left Mugino Shizuri’s body and she collapsed to the ground. The ominous white light in her hand disappeared into the air as if it had dissolved. There was no more sense of danger.

Hamazura picked up the ladies handgun he had thrown aside and looked down at Mugino as he pulled his phone from his pocket. He called Yomikawa’s number. He had it because she had given it to him saying something about giving him guidance if he ever needed someone to talk with.

“It’s Hamazura. The Anti-Skill backup isn’t needed anymore.”

He walked through the destroyed floor and towards the exit as he spoke.

“That’s right. It’s all over.”

Part 10

Hamazura left the botanical ethanol fuel plant in District 3. A few members of

Item’s subordinate organization were waiting outside to destroy the evidence, but no one tried to stop him. To them, he was the person who had just defeated Academy City’s #4 Level 5. They weren’t about to carelessly stop him.

“Yo.”

A figure standing a ways from the building called out to him.

“Hanzou?”

A delinquent from District 7 had no ties to the celeb-filled District 3. Hamazura doubted he was there by chance. He must have been monitoring the radio channels.

“I heard, Hamazura.”

“About what? And how much of it?”

“That you defeated a Level 5 all on your own.”

Hamazura was surprised at how excellent Hanzou’s source of information was, but he said something else as if it had just come to mind.

“It came in handy.”

“It?”

“The ladies handgun. If you hadn’t given it to me, I would’ve died.”

“Ha. You’re quite a monster yourself to have defeated a Level 5 with something like that.”

Hanzou took out two cigarettes and handed one to Hamazura as he spoke.

“See? It was a good present. With an accomplishment like that, no one’s going to reject you now. Although I don’t think there were many people that actually hated you in the first place.”

“…”

“Come on back, Hamazura. There are people waiting for you.”

“Sorry.” Hamazura lit his cigarette and smiled slightly. “I have something I have to do.”

“Tch. Makes me jealous.”

Hanzou said that, but he didn’t press Hamazura any further. Hamazura had faced a monster like Mugino Shizuri on his own. Hanzou could sense a change to Hamazura’s mental state due to it.

“Well, whatever. I’ll be consolidating Skill-Out for now.”

“Sorry, man.”

“But don’t forget. I’ll be keeping your seat open. Once you’re done with what you have to do, come on back.”

The two spoke, smiled, lightly tapped their fists together and parted ways.

Between the lines 4

After holing up in a hotel room for about an hour, the girl in the dress returned to one of School’s hideouts. Kakine Teitoku, the Level 5, was there.

“Oh, where have you been?”

“Just gathering some spending money. Scientists are as horrible as ever. They make sure to calculate out just the basic rate; they don’t give you a tip at all.”

“Hmm. An hour isn’t very long.”

“It’s not like I’m doing anything to be guilty over. We were in a hotel room, but we just talked a bit while flipping through a magazine.”

“…You don’t do anything sexual?”

“No. I don’t need to. I suppose it’s mostly a case by case kind of thing, but my customers aren’t after that kind of thing. Do you know why rich guys go to stores and give women money? It isn’t to satisfy their sexual desire. They want to make relationships with other people outside of work on their own.”

“I really don’t understand that world,” said Kakine.

The girl in the dress spoke half in disbelief.

“You know about workaholics, right? Those people love to work so much that they can’t help themselves and they end up destroying their family. For people like that, a relationship they can make using money feels like a form of salvation. Money is the result of work. By buying friends and love with money, they’re satisfied because they think they have made relationships with their own abilities and that they aren’t completely incompatible with society. I take money and give them some relief about that complex of theirs.”

“I see,” replied Kakine in a voice completely void of interest.

Hearing that, the girl in the dress lost her urge to explain.

“Oh, that’s right. Apparently, Item who was pursuing us has been taken out. There was some infighting which led to #4 Mugino Shizuri going down. Now the organization is finished.”

“What? Infighting? So Mugino did manage to get away from my attack… But who took Mugino out? Frenda took our deal and fled, I defeated Kinuhata Saiai, and Takitsubo Rikou doesn’t have any direct battle ability…”

Kakine trailed off.

“It couldn’t be…”

“Yes. If it couldn’t have been any of the main members, it had to have been someone from the subordinate organization.”

The Level 0 who had come back to the elevator hall to protect Takitsubo Rikou came to both their minds. Kakine whistled in praise of Hamazura Shiage.

The girl in the dress stared at Kakine.

“How’s the analysis with the Tweezers going?”

Kakine Teitoku had a metal glove on his right hand that had clear claws on the index finger and the middle finger. The naked eye couldn’t tell this, but inside the claws were masses of silicon that had been collected from the air. Of course, these so-called masses were only 70 nanometers across and an electron microscope was needed to confirm they were there.

“There was something that had always bothered me,” muttered Kakine as he clacked the claws together. “That bastard Aleister always knew *a little too much* about our actions. It was too much for it to just be surveillance from the security cameras, the security robots, and the satellite. It was always a mystery how he gathered his information.”

“…”

“The answer is nothing special. He spread about ten million invisible machines throughout the city to do it. It’s not surprising he knows every little thing with this.”

He was talking about Underline.

They had a spherical body with three wire-shaped cilia on the left and three on the right. Instead of walking on the ground, they floated through the air.

Those miniscule machines used the convection of the air to generate their own power, gathered data indefinitely, used a quantum signal they produced transmitted over a direct electron beam to pass information between them, and created a type of network. Underline was the sole direct line of information into the windowless building so those tiny bodies had to hold information from the darkest depths of the city that would shake the world if it got out.

“Even knowing of Underline’s existence, finding microscopic machines isn’t easy, and, even if you do capture some, there’s no way to get the information out. You have to open up a nano-sized device and attach a cord to it. Not to mention that apparently carelessly ‘observing’ the quantum signal inside it will cause the information to change.”

That was why the Tweezers were necessary.

No matter how small the nanodevices were, an item developed to grab elementary particles would have no problem. With it, getting the information out of Underline was quite possible.

The girl in the dress spoke while looking at Kakine.

“What about the result of the analysis?”

“It was exactly as expected,” responded Kakine. “No good. It’s true that there is a lot of data in Underline, but I don’t think this is enough to compete with Aleister with equal footing. We have to give another push to add to this data.”

“So you’re really going to do it?”

“…Yes. I will kill Academy City’s #1. It’s the only way. Being the Spare Plan just isn’t enough if I want the negotiations with Aleister to go well. I have to become the central and irreplaceable Main Plan.”

“I see,” responded the girl in the dress with no real emotion. “Do whatever you want, but I’m not taking any part with a battle against Accelerator.”

“Ah?”

“My Measure Heart regulates the distance between people’s hearts. So if I take the distance of the person Accelerator is closest to, I may be able to make him hesitate in attacking.”

“And?”

“But not everyone reacts to feeling like the person closest to them is enemy by stopping their attack. Some people go into a frenzy and come in with an even harsher attack because they feel that person has betrayed them. …Can we trust Accelerator to not do that? Sorry, but I get the feeling he would attack me no matter where I set the distance to. He’s too muddy to read.”

“Hmm,” responded Kakine uninterestedly.

There was no disappointment in his voice. He must not have expected the girl in the dress to be much help in the battle anyway.

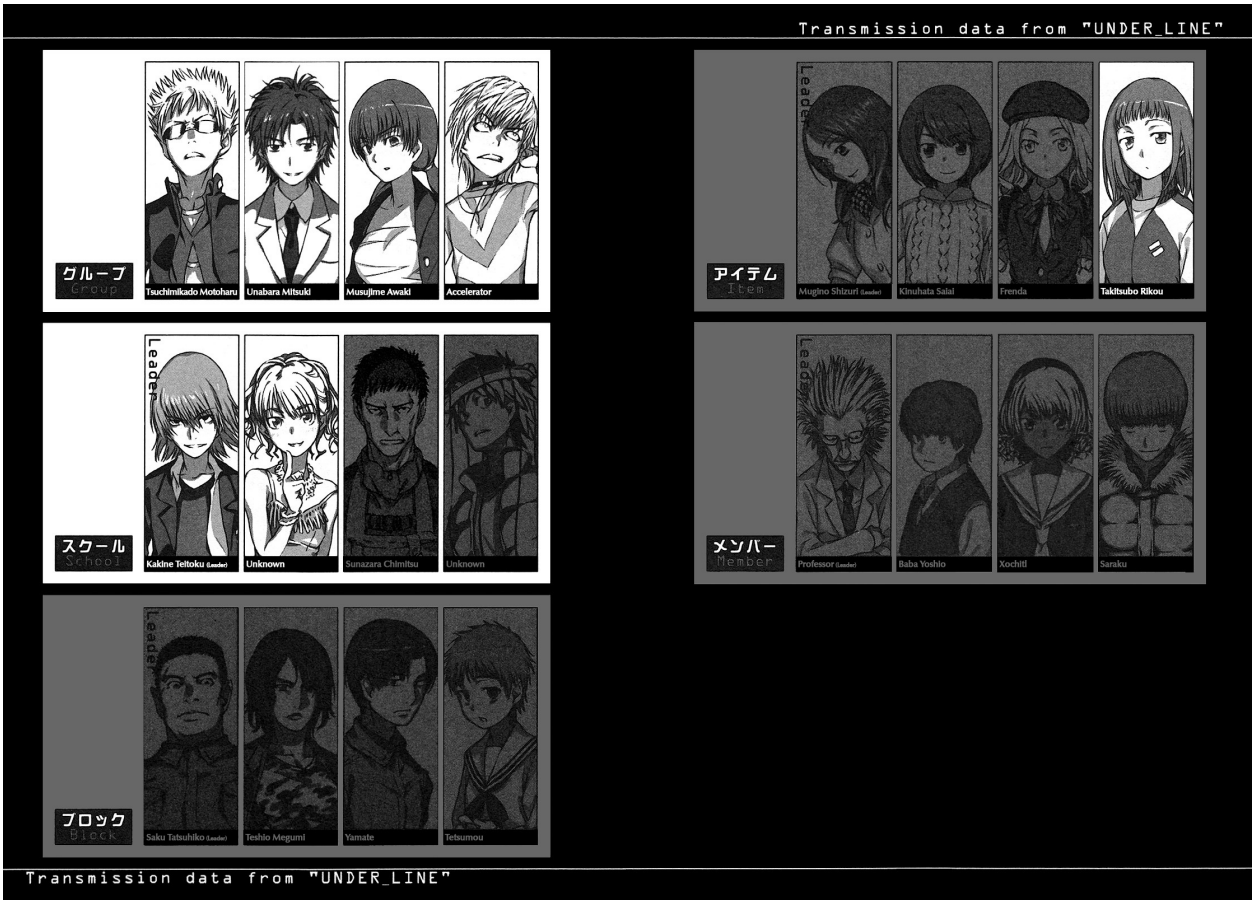
The girl in the dress looked at the claws on Kakine’s right hand.

“If you have the result, tell me. I want to know when we can directly negotiate with Aleister.”

“Sure thing,” said Kakine and the girl in the dress left School’s hideout.

Kakine Teitoku stared down at the Tweezers and calmly smiled.

“…Accelerator, huh?”



Chapter 5: Defeat the Person with the Strongest Black Wings. *Dark_Matter.*

Part 1

Because of Block’s collapse, things had settled down for now.

Tsuchimikado was taking care of wrapping things up, Musujime was off taking care of her wounds, and as for Unabara, though it was not known where he had gone or what he was doing, his situation could be called safe at least.
Accelerator, who had nothing to do (and no motivation, for that matter), took a railcar back to District 7 and bought a can of coffee from a random corner store.

At this time, his phone rang.

On the screen, it showed "Entry 3", Tsuchimikado’s number- but after answering it, he found that it was someone else calling.

“Thanks for your effort, Accelerator. Block’s plan to assassinate the General Superintendent is finally over. This is all thanks to you people from Group.”

“So it’s you.”

Hearing this voice, Accelerator answered impatiently.

“I’m fortunate to have such capable subordinates.”

“…So you really want to die, huh.”

“No, no- this time, I’m thanking you from the bottom of my heart. Due to that, in addition to the usual rewards you receive from your job, I’ll give you some useful information as a personal gift.”

“Useful information?”

“That’s right. A bit of information related to Serial Number 20001: Last Order’s life.”

Part 2

Uiharu Kazari and Last Order were sitting inside an open-air café.

Last Order, who had come out looking for a lost child, had walked so much that her legs were sore and was currently half-lying on a table. Uiharu had sat down next to her and challenged the shop’s specialty: the large sweet parfait.

“So, have you found the person you’re looking for? Did your ahoge finally stop with that *biribiri* reaction?”

“'…This thing that Misaka has isn’t an ahoge!' says Misaka as Misaka has a tired voice.”

But this child who was around ten years old had a cluster of hair that stood up, and it was waving in the autumn wind. That was, without question, the ultimate ahoge!

“'Uu… I’m sure I felt him around here somewhere, but he suddenly went off somewhere,' says Misaka as Misaka is feeling down due to doing all that work for nothing.”

Last Order, who was like a deflated balloon, suddenly raised her head.

Did she find that person? Uiharu thought, but that wasn’t the case.

A few girls walked past, and Last Order stared at a free gift key chain that was from a nearby fast food chain outlet.

“'Mi-Misaka really wants that!' says Misaka as Misaka has no wallet on her and thus can only look at Uiharu nee-san with her puppy dog eyes!”

“Ah, geez. Didn’t you go out to look for someone?”

“'Yeah, and he’s in that fast food shop,' says Misaka as Misaka can feel—”

“It’s not alright to lie, you know! Besides, I just finished ordering that large sweet parfait, and I’ve only just started; I can’t leave now. ”

“'How can you be this relaxed!?' says Misaka as Misaka bangs on the table repeatedly and mutters.”

“Ah, don’t you have the leftover change from the taxi?”

“'Ah! You’re right!' says Misaka as Misaka takes out the paper note and charges towards the fast food shop!”

Before her voice finished echoing, Last Order had already left the café. Uiharu could only wave a handkerchief and say loudly, “Remember to come back!”

As Uiharu was about to start her attack on the ice cream section, a voice spoke from beside her.

“Sorry to bother you, ojou-san.”

Uiharu hurriedly put down her spoon and turned towards the voice. Standing there was a teenager who gave off a vulgar sense of style. On his right hand was some kind of mechanical claw.

On this teenager’s face was a warm smile that didn’t suit his appearance.

“Um… may I ask who you are?”

“Kakine Teitoku. I’m looking for someone.”

While he was talking, this teenager who called himself Kakine brought out a photo.

“Do you know where this child is now? Her name is Last Order.”

“…”

Uiharu stared at the photo for a few seconds. She then looked back and forth

between Kakine and the photo before finally shaking her head.

“Sorry, I haven’t seen her.”

“Is that so?”

“If you're in a hurry, I suggest you should go to the nearest Anti-Skill booth and ask there.”

“You have a point. But before that, maybe I’ll keep looking by myself for a while.”

Kakine said as he turned to leave.

Uiharu lowered her head, and was about to start her attack on her ice cream once more.

“Ah, right. I have something I forgot to mention.”

“?”

Without waiting for Uiharu to raise her head, the next sentence came with a blow to her head.

“I knew you were with Last Order! You idiot!”

Bang, the impact spread from her temple.

Before she realized she had been hit, Uiharu was already falling from her seat. She reflexively kicked the table over and upended her chair. The barely eaten large sweet parfait scattered across the road like a crushed fruit.

Around them, people passing by screamed.

Uiharu, who still didn’t know what has happened, first thought of standing back up.

But Kakine’s foot stepped viciously on her right shoulder and pinned her back down.

“That’s why I didn’t ask ‘Do you know her’, but instead ‘Where did she go’!”

Kakine put all of his weight onto his foot.

Crack, as she felt the heavy weight, the pain of bones rubbing against each other spread through her body. Then, her shoulder became dislocated.

Uiharu unconsciously tried to roll over in her pain, but Kakine’s leg was like an unmoving steel beam.

At this point, Uiharu was screaming rather than merely whimpering, but it didn't move Kakine at all.

“You discovered me and told Last Order to escape; I understand that you aren’t all that capable. Even though I’m a scumbag, I prefer not to involve normal people. If you had cooperated with me in the first place, I wouldn’t have had to use violence.”

It was a holiday afternoon, and there were a lot of people around in the open-air café- but they only looked on from afar and didn't try to help.

But they couldn't really be blamed for that.

Uiharu was wearing a Judgment armband. Although Judgment members only dealt with incidents on school grounds, some students believed that they were people who protected the peace like the police or the army. Even if the organization did have its elites, there were also weaklings. It was a shame, though, because the people who didn't understand these limitations thought that if someone in Judgment could be easily defeated, they wouldn’t stand a chance either.

There was no help for Uiharu here.

Kakine put more strength into his leg, forcing his shoe deeper into Uiharu’s shoulder.

“…But! I have no mercy for my enemies. If you didn’t know anything and were only around Last Order by chance, then I wouldn’t have to do this. However, the instant you decided to protect her by your own will, it became another matter entirely. So please, ojou-san: don’t force me to kill you right here.”

Gacha kara kara, the dislocated bones were forcibly moved, and pain flooded

her body.

By the time she finally reacted to her pain and tried to withstand it, Uiharu's eyes were already filled with tears. The complaints of why she had to go through this, the fear of facing overwhelming and unstoppable violence, and the regret for not being able to resolve this situation: these negative feelings mixed together and weighed down Uiharu's mind from within.

There was only one possible way for her to be released from this.

"Where is Last Order?"

In her hazy mind that was filled with pain, there was only Kakine's voice.

"Tell me, and I'll let you go."

In the maze that had no exit, someone had finally pointed the way out. For Uiharu who was engulfed by the darkness known as violence, she desired the finish line so much. Her sense of responsibility as a member of Judgment and her personality as "Uiharu Kazari" were being shattered by that one thought of "being released from this pain".

Her lips finally moved.

With tears running down her cheeks, she slowly opened her mouth.

She knew she should stay silent, but she could not even accomplish that.

And so, while hating her own uselessness, she declared her final intention.

"…? What?"

Kakine furrowed his eyebrows. He didn't seem to understand the other side's intention.

With trembling lips, Uiharu said once more,

"Can you… not… hear me?"

Using what energy she had left.

“I said… that child is at a place you will never see. I’m not… lying.”

She said this while poking her tongue out, as if she was using all her energy to toy with her foe.

Kakine Teitoku went silent.

“…Very well.”

As he said that, he lifted his leg off Uiharu’s shoulder.

But his foot did not go back onto the ground. Instead, it was aimed at Uiharu Kazari’s head.

“I told you before: though I don’t attack normal people, I have no mercy towards my enemies. If you understand that and still refuse to cooperate, then there’s nothing I can do.”

Kakine Teitoku put all his strength into his foot that was hanging above her.

The foot was as if it was about to crush an empty can.

“Farewell.”

Boom, a large gust of wind made Uiharu unconsciously closed her tear-filled eyes; this was all she could do now.

But Kakine’s foot did not crush Uiharu’s head.

Another explosion rang out across Academy City.

A gale swept through them like a blast wave. Uiharu opened her eyes and saw an ATM and shards of its glass and walls. A twister made of these shards smashed against Kakine Teitoku at an incredible speed. Taking this blow head-on, Kakine stumbled, and the foot that was going to crush Uiharu ended up stomping the floor a few millimeters away from her head.

From inside the completely destroyed ATM, pure-white paper notes flew in all directions like an angel’s wings.

In the middle of all that, Uiharu heard a voice.

“…Seriously. Is that all it takes to satisfy you, scumbag?”

Passionate, white, insane.

That was the voice of the demon-like strongest Level 5 in Academy City! “Let's raise the stakes some more. While we’re at it, I’ll teach you what it means to be a villain.”

Part 3

“That hurt.”

Kakine Teitoku directed his gaze from Uiharu Kazari to Accelerator.

“That was irritating. No wonder you’re the #1, you’re the most irritating person I’ve ever met. I was right to come and kill you first.”

“You sure talk big for a lil’ chicken that’s afraid of fighting me head on and has to take a hostage. The difference in our strength was obvious from the instant you went after the brat.”

“Are you stupid? She’s just a little insurance. Who would fight a bastard like you fairly? That’s too troublesome, and you’re not worth that.”

These were Academy City’s #1 and #2.

Accelerator and Kakine Teitoku. Neither one of them was holding any information back.

Naturally, someone would take care of cleaning up the aftermath later.

“For a pig like you, you should go be a stuffed pig on a food platter where you belong.”

“It’s laughable, you lapdog. Do you really think that by protecting some weaklings you can become a ‘good guy’?”

“Ha, so you still don’t understand.”

Accelerator threw his modern cane to one side and said slowly, “Fine, now is a good time to teach you something: even villains have standards!”

Boom! A loud explosion rang out.

Accelerator and Kakine Teitoku clashed head on! A shock wave exploded outwards, flattening everything, knocking down bystanders, and breaking glass windows. Even in the midst of this mess, however, each's eyes were only on their opponent.

The result for this round was clear.

Kakine Teitoku, who had taken the attack head-on, was blown backwards and smashed into a café with a loud crash. But Accelerator merely felt displeasure, since the other side seemed to have avoided a head on confrontation.

“So you’re the esper that can control any vectors.”

Came a voice out of the café that looked like it had been hit by a bomb.

“Then, what if you were to smash into a large mass that can’t be moved regardless of all the vectors you can gather? Guess that wouldn’t work. As long as my vectors aren't being controlled, it’s meaningless.”

Completely unhurt.

Kakine Teitoku walked out of the shop with some kind of cocoon around him. No, they were wings! Six wings like that of an angel’s slowly spread behind him.

Accelerator furrowed his brow.

“Mimicking myths doesn’t suit you, you unoriginal idiot.”

“You don’t have to worry about that, I already know.”

Before their voices finished echoing, they clashed once more.

Against Accelerator who controlled the vectors beneath his feet and charged, Kakine Teitoku spread his wings and flew almost twenty meters to the center of the road.

Accelerator swept his arm in front of him and slashed through the air, totally taking control of the airflow vectors. Boom! A hurricane with wind speeds of a 120 meters per second blasted towards Kakine like a cannon shot.

“?!”

Waving his dexterous wings, Kakine tried to avoid the attack, but a *click* sound reached his ears. Looking down, he found that Accelerator had already closed the distance between them. Before Kakine could even figure that out, Accelerator thrust his right hand towards Kakine’s chest.

“Did you know, that everything in this world is made of elementary particles?”

While saying that, Kakine retracted his wings to protect himself. When Accelerator made contact with the wings, they immediately disintegrated into countless white feathers and stopped the attack.

“Elementary particles are things even tinier than molecules and atoms. We know that there exist gauge bosons, leptons, and quarks. There are also hadrons which are made when antiparticles or quarks gather, but, well, they're all divided into a few general categories. These elementary particles make up the world.”

“However,” said Kakine in a soft voice, “That kind of common knowledge does not apply to my Dark Matter!”

Boom! Accompanying gale winds, the six wings behind Kakine instantly recovered their forms.

“The Dark Matter I create is matter that does not exist in this world. It’s not matter that hasn't yet been discovered, nor matter that theoretically exists, but rather matter which undeniably does not exist.”

A material made by an esper ability that could not be classified by science.

Faced by these white wings that seemed to have come from a different world and defy the laws of physics, Accelerator's will was not shaken.

Who cares what they are? They will all be shattered by the ability to manipulate vectors.

"OK, then I'll blast you apart along with your 'Dark Matter'."

With one more step forward, Accelerator could tear apart Kakine Teitoku's heart.

However...

"You still don't understand."

As Kakine finished his sentence, his white wings let out a 'swoosh' and projected a brilliant white light.

"?!"

A burning pain forced Accelerator to back away from Kakine involuntarily. At the same time, he noticed the change in the situation.

Accelerator who could reflect all vectors was actually hurt by an outside attack.

"That was diffraction. Light or electromagnetic waves change direction when passing through narrow gaps; this is common knowledge even in high school textbooks. Using multiple gaps at the same time will make the waves interfere with each other."

Simply put it was by diffracting light through the countless unseen gaps on the wings to change the nature of sunlight and use it to attack Accelerator. It was not that the white wings gave off light, but that the light itself was changed by diffracting through them.

"Ah, the value of things depends on how you use them. So, how does it feel to be burned to death by sunlight?"

However...

"… Go back and study up on physics, you idiot. No matter how you diffract

sunlight it doesn’t change the nature of it into something like a beam of light that kills.”

“Hm, that is indeed the case with the normal physics of this world.”

Kakine’s six wings curled up and gathered strength.

“But! My Dark Matter is matter that does not exist in this world! It completely disobeys the laws of physics of this world. Sunlight that gets diffracted by the Dark Matter will also have its own set of laws! Foreign bodies are like this: by just mixing in a little bit, the world will completely change!”

Fwoom! The six wings blew up a gale wind towards Accelerator. Accelerator used his reflection to subdue the wind while trying to figure out his opponent’s aim. Looking closely, he found Kakine smiling.

“Reverse calculations, complete.”

“!?”

When Accelerator heard that he tried to dodge, but the six wings had already begun to strike. However, unlike before the six wings were used solely as blunt weapons for hitting.

A series of *gacha gacha* sounds exploded out from Accelerator’s body.

Accelerator, who could reflect all vectors, was blown over 10m away, hitting one of the trees on the sidewalk. The thick trunk of the tree got snapped by that one blow.

“Oof…!?”

(So the sunlight and wind from before was all for…!!)

“Accelerator, you said before you can reflect everything, but that’s actually incorrect.”

Kakine’s wings spread soundlessly.

Accelerator flew up to a rooftop, but the over twenty-meter long wings aimed at

him like giant swords to strike him down.

“If you reflect sound then you can’t hear anything, and if you reflect physical objects you cannot hold anything. You subconsciously establish a filter that sees everything as harmful or not, and use your reflect to push away anything that could harm you.”

Accelerator spit out the blood in his mouth, blew apart the water cylinder on top of the building with one stomp and jumped aside using the rebound.

The white wings that struck down crashed into the building, and split the building vertically in two. Large dust clouds swelled outwards from there.

“The sunlight and wind affected by the Dark Matter are infused with 25,000 different kinds of energy. Then by observing your reflection and using a filtering system that judges which energies are deemed ‘harmful’ or not, I can use the energies that are subconsciously accepted as not harmful to attack you.”

Even if Accelerator changed the rules which his reflect was based on, Kakine Teitoku would immediately use his Dark Matter to inspect the change. The repeated attack and defense this way would only make Accelerator’s wounds get worse and worse.

“Such is Dark Matter.”

Kakine Teitoku smiled and spread his wings.

“This space which has been affected by foreign bodies is no longer the world that you know!”

Faced with this taunting, Accelerator controlled the air flow and made four tornadoes behind him.

Clash!

Accelerator’s tornadoes swept away Kakine’s wings, and Kakine’s wings blew apart Accelerator’s tornadoes. The buildings which were made of steel beams and cement were trembling from the blast waves and shook continuously. Suddenly, the two were no longer where they had been. The two of them continuously attacked each other, moving in parallel down the main road at an

extreme speed. Occasionally they flew towards a windmill electricity generator, and other times they kicked streetlights away, flying down the road at a frightening speed.

“Even though I’ve finally snatched the Tweezers, studied the Underline, and planned many other things, none of them worked. Guess killing you, the #1, is the fastest and most efficient method.”

Kakine said while waving his wings that spanned several tens of meters long.

“What? You maggot, you’re still on about rankings at a time like this?”

“This has nothing to do with rankings! I only want the right to directly speak with Aleister!”

Accelerator ignored Kakine’s words and stomped on the gravel road, and then kicked the rocks that were sent flying up using a karate kick.

Boom! A loud explosion rang out.

The vectors of the pebbles were changed and fired off faster than a Railgun, but vanished after a few millimeters. However, the pressure waves did not vanish, and the attack felt as if it would tear the very air apart. But, Kakine also put strength into his wings and scattered the attack. The waves of attacks between the two clashes against one another, sent a ‘tsunami’ of air throughout their surroundings and blew streetlights and advertisement signs into the air.

“That bastard Aleister has many plans in place at the same time. Even if it's the most promising plan for him, once he finds it doesn’t work he’ll immediately switch to another plan. Then when the time is right, he’ll go back to the original plan. Just like a spider web, no matter which path you choose sooner or later you will end up back on the same path.”

Accelerator and Kakine who were flying parallel down the road suddenly changed paths and chose the shortest route to smash into each other. A four-lane crossroad was blocked completely due to the clash between those two. Nobody complained, and nobody dared to complain. Everyone here had the instinct that if they dared to speak up they would die.

The silhouettes of the two swept past each other.

A few seconds later, the air exploded and a shock-wave rang out.

“If that’s the case then there is only one efficient path to take. Destroy all other plans that are prepared, so that Aleister has no other path to take. Then, as long as I’m not the spare plan, as long as I am the center of the plan, then Aleister can no longer ignore me! I don’t want to destroy this city, it is still useful. That’s why I’ll start from devouring the core, and in the end take control of it!”

Accelerator’s and Kakine’s blood flew around the air.

“So, only by killing off me, the true center, you can take over the plans.”

The two of them stood facing each other, slowly gauging their opponent.

If Kakine could say such rhetoric then he must be confident of the truth in the fact that Aleister had many plans.

And for Kakine to have done what he did, naturally he had his own reasons. As for what they were, Accelerator didn’t try to figure them out. In the darkness of Academy City, there was more tragedy than stars in the night sky. Chances were one of them was what had twisted Kakine’s personality. Just like how Accelerator had killed 10,000 Sisters for the experiment. Just like how Accelerator was willing to give up his life to save one person.

“Bullshit.”

Accelerator continued, while on that train of thought.

“Maybe you think what you’re saying is nothing less than the absolute moral truth, but everything that’s coming out of your stinking mouth is complete bullshit.”

“Ha. Even though you have the right to directly communicate with Aleister, you have no idea the value of that right! People like you have no right to say that about me.”

“At the moment you spoke those words, you became one of those common filth that pass themselves off as great villains.”

“That doesn’t sound convincing.”

Kakine Teitoku said uninterestedly.

“I don’t want to lay hands on normal people either. If I’m in a good mood I’ll even let bad guys off. Having said that, I don’t really care if those people live or die. Aren’t you the same? In our battle just then, how many spectators and bystanders have got hurt? Cement and asphalt were traveling over the speed of sound, and shock-waves wiped out everything. That’s the kind of battle between us.”

“… …”

“Including the brat that shielded Last Order, they are all the same. You don’t have to right to lecture me, murderer. In order to battle with me, the you that kills off bystanders has no right to lecture me. Don’t tell me you truly believe you are exempt from your own ideals.”

“Ha, ‘battling with you and killing off bystanders in the process’, is it?”

Even when accused of this, Accelerator smiled leisurely.

“What a scumbag. It’s because you have no aesthetics that you can say bullshit like that.”

“Huh?”

“In the end, do you understand why you’re #2 and I’m #1?”

As he laughed he spreads his arms out wide.

“Between me and you, there is an impassable wall.”

Kakine was fuming at his comments, but he also noticed it.

Their surroundings.

True, the battle between Accelerator and Dark Matter had destroyed the road. The glass from the buildings had shattered, traffic lights had been blasted off, and trees had been blown away and were sticking out of the cement buildings.

But, something was missing.

Tragedies.

Glass shards had rained down from above, but there was no-one hurt. A sweeping gale had twisted the path of those shards into falling elsewhere. The advertisement signs had miraculously protected those that were to slow to run away. The others were the same, with not a single person hurt. Though it was uncertain, in their fighting to this point, probably not a single bystander had been hurt.

(I-impossible!)

Kakine felt his throat go dry.

“Are you saying… that you protected them all?”

Thinking back, the first sneak attack could have been much more powerful. But if that was the case, Last Order’s companion at that time would also have been hurt.

This was his way of doing things.

Even in a death match between the #1 and #2 Level 5s, even on a battlefield where a slight mistake could get you killed, Accelerator protected the normal people who he had never met before.

“Don’t joke around! Are you saying everything was under your control from the beginning?!”

Accelerator showed impatience, as if saying ‘of course’, and taunted Kakine for his incompetence that he could not do the same.

“Are you angry, you lowlife?”

Towards Kakine who was shocked, Accelerator impatiently said, “Now this is what should be called a villain.”

If after doing this much, if one was still called a villain, then just what did a hero in Accelerator’s mind have to do?!

“Stop spouting nonsense, Accelerator!!”

Kakine Teitoku roared out and increased the power in his six wings. Changing the lengths, the structure, the white wings spread out and transformed into six lethal weapons that aimed at six of Accelerator's vital points.

Facing these, Accelerator only smiled.

"Bring it on."

"These are more than enough to bring you down, since I've already figured your filtering system. That sham of a defense cannot stop this!"

"Indeed, you can control matter that doesn't exist in this world."

Accelerator only wagged his index finger and made a 'feel free to do your worst' expression.

"The laws written in school textbooks don't work on them, and light and electromagnetic waves that come in contact with the Dark Matter get twisted into energy that can't possibly exist. So using energy calculation algorithms based on rules of this world will definitely have flaws."

The killing intent between the two had risen dramatically.

This crossroad was now fully saturated with the breath of death.

"Then all I have to do is include them in my calculations. To change the laws of this world into a new world that includes your Dark Matter and create a new algorithm, then it's checkmate."

"Using your vector transformation… to control my Dark Matter…?"

"Don't you think I can do it?"

"Ha, do you think you can gauge the entirety of the depths of my ability just by doing that?"

"Your depth is actually quite shallow."

"…!?"

"Shallow to the point I don't even need to try and gauge it!"

A sound of explosions ripped through the sky.

It only took an instant for the two to clash.

The victor in the match between the #1 and #2 had been decided.

Part 4

Accelerator looked at the ground, and saw a walking stick nearby. Probably something that flew near him from the spectators that were affected by their fight. Now, accompanying the uproar they had caused, several hundred people had crowded around.

But Accelerator showed no intention of hiding. Other small fries would take care of covering up the incident, there was no point in worrying about this himself.

"…"

Looking back,

In the center of the crossroad that was in upheaval, Kakine Teitoku was lying there on the ground. The white wings that had their control of the vectors taken from them, had stabbed through Kakine. A puddle of blood was slowly spreading, as if an unknown magic circle was slowly taking shape.

However, Dark Matter was still alive.

And Accelerator was a villain, not one of the good guys.

At this time, one of those puke-inducing good guys would probably leave it at this, and turn to walk away. Or maybe they would even be merciful, staying to take care of the wounds the bad guy had suffered, and point him a new direction in life to make everything better. But now, Accelerator only wordlessly pulled out a gun from its holster on his side. From the instant Kakine Teitoku decided to involve civilians and Last Order in his fight against Accelerator, he never had the

thought of forgiving him.

(This is probably the difference between a good guy and a bad guy), Accelerator thought to himself.

“Farewell, scumbag.”

Accelerator cocked the gun with his thumb, and said in a quiet voice to the still unconscious Kakine.

“Well, this is probably better than being taken down by one of those heroes.”

His index finger was on the trigger. It was all over. Not relying on the kindness of others, nor miracles from the heavens; this was the future on the path of evil that was carved by Accelerator’s own actions. Accelerator carried out his actions in his own style, and pointed the gun at the enemy’s head, and slowly put strength into his right hand.

There was only one step left to the end of everything, and the peace that was built on death.

“Stop, Accelerator!”

A loud voice sounded out from outside his view. From the crowd gathered a familiar face jumped out. Wearing a green jersey that was ridiculously unfashionable, and without any make-up on her face. She was a school teacher and also one of the Anti-Skill peace-keepers.

Yomikawa Aiho.

She ran straight towards him.

“I don’t know where you went, or what this current situation means. But, all I have to say is this: Give me the gun. That’s not something you need!”

Yomikawa didn’t have a gun on her. She didn’t even have special batons, tasers, or anything for self-protection. Everyone watching might have thought she was an idiot. Facing a rampaging esper that had done this much damage, going in unarmed was almost like suicide.

Yomikawa probably knew just how dangerous the situation was for her.

Or putting it another way, as a member of Anti-Skill standing on the frontlines, she understood far better than bystanders just how dangerous her actions were.

“I’m a villain.”

“Then I’ll stop you.”

“Are you serious?”

“Apart from that I have no other choice.”

Not defeating him, just stopping him. That was her way of doing things. Just like how Accelerator chose the life of a villain, Yomikawa would never agree with methods that pointed a weapon at the children that they needed to protect. Accelerator stared into Yomikawa’s eyes. Those eyes shone out with determination. In Accelerator’s view this was a way of life that was beyond foolish, but to her this was something that was worth giving up her life for.

“It doesn’t matter whether you are a villain or hero, Accelerator, nor what kind of world you are involved in. For me, what’s most important is bringing you back. No matter how dark or cold your world is, I’ll never give you up, and drag you back!”

In this instant, the two of them shared the same position. This had nothing to do with being the strongest Level 5 in Academy City or an adult with no power of her own; Yomikawa Aiho was blocking Accelerator’s way.

“That’s why I have to stop you. For the children I must protect, and for the dearly-loved peace. Where you and Last Order can both happily live together. For such a future, the gun in your hand is unnecessary.”

“…”

Accelerator wordlessly finished listening to her words.

He came to a conclusion.

The gun that was pointed at Kakine turned and pointed towards Yomikawa.

(So,)

Yomikawa was an enemy. Even if she was one of the good guys, even if her reason was for Accelerator’s own good, her actions were impeding the way of Accelerator’s path of evil.

So she must be eliminated; but she didn’t have to be killed. If he wanted to go easy on her his gun skills were more than enough to do so.

(Here and now.)

Accelerator also had people he wanted to protect. People like Last Order, the Sisters, Yoshikawa Kikyou, and Yomikawa Aiho. So, he must be cruel to the very end. Even if he had to fight against the whole world, and even against those he must protect, he had to save those people from the darkness.

(Fire.)

“You can’t do it.”

By the time he realized, Yomikawa had walked up to him, and covered both the gun and Accelerator’s hand softly with her own hands.

“You haven't rotted that much.”

Victory was decided just like that. The fingers that were holding onto the gun were slowly plied open one by one by Yomikawa. Then she took out the clip, pulled the slide back, and ejected the bullet already in the chamber. Faced with this kind of end, Accelerator could only stare blankly.

At this time…

Splat.

An attack made of Dark Matter came suddenly, and cut off Accelerator’s thought.

The target wasn’t him.

Yomikawa opened her eyes wide in shock. She slowly looked down. The white

wing made of unknown materials had stabbed through the side of her stomach like a knife. Her green jersey had been dyed red. And with each passing moment the redness was spreading into a frighteningly large patch.

Yomikawa wanted to say something, but after stumbling a few steps she collapsed.

Accelerator could only look on. Behind the collapsed Yomikawa stood a human figure. It was the unconscious Kakine Teitoku.

And behind him were the six wings.

There was no need to explain what had just happened.

Swish. The sharp wings that stabbed through Yomikawa's side were lightly pulled out.

"…She actually said no matter how dark or cold the world you are in, she'll definitely bring you back?"

Kakine said with a face stained by blood.

The reason he attacked Yomikawa wasn't because she was in his way. From the beginning, Kakine's eyes only had Accelerator. That slight hesitation, the slight hesitation in front of Yomikawa that he would step off the path of evil, was the reason he attacked Yomikawa.

To him, that hesitation, was the obstacle.

If Accelerator had given up evil, then just what had he himself lost to?

Because of that, Kakine Teitoku raged.

"That's impossible! How could it be that easy?! This is our world. This is the end of darkness and despair!! You babble on with fancy words, but at the end of the end, you rely on something like this. This is what you called aesthetics?!"

A shattering speech. Lead by rage and ill will, the words that were illogical smashed against Accelerator's body like blast waves.

“In the end you are the same as me, unable to protect anybody. After this many more will die, killed by a mongrel like me. Isn’t that right, Accelerator!! Didn’t you also slaughter your way to where you are now!!”

Kakine shakily stood upright with his body stained by blood and grime.

But this wasn’t for fighting against Accelerator. For him who had a good understanding of ill will, Kakine’s ill will was directed elsewhere.

And that was towards Yomikawa lying on the ground.

“S-stop.”

“I can’t hear you.”

Cracking sounds were made, but no-one was sure what was happening. Kakine wasn’t touching Yomikawa, but Yomikawa’s body was being stepped on by something unseen. Her body was trembling and the red-black patch, upon the pressure, had started to spread once more.

“Stop!!”

“I can’t fucking hear you!!”

Accelerator’s voice was being drowned out by Kakine’s roar.

“Don’t count on me to stop, you idiot!! What do you expect talking to solve, you villain? You have got to be joking—that’s not how we do things!”

Kakine used his ability and increased the pressure on Yomikawa.

This time it was not just her side, even Yomikawa’s mouth started to have sticky crimson liquid leaking out.

“If you want to stop someone, then kill him. If you don’t like something, then destroy it. That’s the evil! Being saved is unnecessary!! Being smiled upon and forgiven is unnecessary!! A piece of shit bastard like you doesn’t deserve to be forgiven! Come on! Let me see the ‘evil’ that you, who have only spouted fancy words, have!!”

—you fool.

Though you've said before you won't involve normal people this is the result. Even though you've given up on the light, even though you've decided to stand at the pinnacle of the darkness, in the end you got tempted by soft words into reaching for the thread of light that reached for you. His own sight only slightly left the world of darkness, his own hands only slightly touched the world of light. The priority of eliminating Kakine Teitoku was pushed aside and this tragedy was the result.

So…

Accelerator this time changed completely into evil. He swore no matter what he would lose, he would completely shatter Kakine Teitoku!!

A searing headache. It felt like something sharp had stabbed into his brain, and devoured everything in Accelerator. His ears could hear something like fruit being smashed into pulp. His eyes had started to flow with a liquid that was not tears. A liquid that smelled of rust, was redder than tears, thicker than tears, and felt uncomfortable. Even this liquid that came out of his eyes only left a taste of disgust.

And what came afterward was…

Rampage.

"Oh."

That pillar that had supported him had completely shattered. His whole body had been infected by a murky emotion. Accelerator, who clenched his teeth and had crimson eyes, let out a roar that echoed to the ends of the earth!

“Aaaaaaaargh!!”

From behind him spread murky black wings, as if they shot out from his back. This pair of wings that contained something which could blow away the mind, and anger that shattered his own sense of self, spread instantly over tens of meters, and shaved off parts of the buildings and roads around him.

“Ha.”

This pair of black wings, Kakine had seen it before, and knew what it was.

The elementary particles that didn’t exist in this world, Dark Matter.

“… So strong. Such powerful evil. So you can do it if you put your mind to it,

villain. If that’s the case then indeed Dark Matter is only suitable for being the spare plan. However, this doesn’t mean it’s all decided!!”

Kakine’s six wings, as if responding to his roar, spread explosively. The wings that spanned several tens of meters emitted a mysterious glow, and at the same time had an inorganic feel like a machine. Almost like a giant weapon gods and angels normally use.

Flap. The air around the six wings let out a howl.

Accelerator and Dark Matter controlled the organic and inorganic powers respectively.

Different from this world, this was 'organic' and 'inorganic' in terms of a different world. The One Who Wields the Power of God and The One Who Has Touched the Territory of God. Now the odds of victory were even, only that unlike Accelerator, Kakine hadn't lost himself.

An unprecedented power was expanding within him.

And, he had perfectly mastered this power.

Now the position of the #1 and #2 of Academy City was about to be reversed. This was neither a bluff nor an exaggeration. He now believed even if he fought against all the armies in the world, and even every esper in Academy City, he could emerge victorious and unharmed.

“Hahaha!! Uwahahahaha!!”

Kakine laughed and waved his completely awakened six wings down at Accelerator.

He no longer saw Accelerator as a threat, but only a thing to test his new powers on.

Splat.

Kakine Teitoku’s body was pressed into the asphalt by a great power.

“Wha…?!”

He completely didn’t understand what just happened.

Accelerator’s wings didn’t move at all. He only stared at Kakine and slightly moved his hands. With just that, he defeated Kakine who had absolute power and ground him deep into the ground.

His right hand that had the Tweezers on it was torn off from the elbow downwards.

(Ah! …Uwah! Wh-Wha?! Just what is—)

Accelerator must have changed vectors and energies of some sort, and redirected those towards Kakine as an attack. Even though he understood, even if Accelerator had gathered all the energies in this world, this phenomenon shouldn’t have happened. The Kakine Teitoku now couldn’t lose to this world.

Unreasonable.

Inexplicable.

With an overwhelming presence Accelerator walked step by step towards Kakine Teitoku. His steps were like the countdown until the end of Kakine’s life, when it reached zero it would be all over. And, Accelerator had reached that last step.

“Ha, ha.”

“—yjrpEVILqw”

“Bastard…! Damn it, so this is how it is!! Your mission is…?!”

No reply, just a fist filled with killing intent.

An overwhelming slaughter had begun.

Part 5

The sound of flesh being pounded resounded across Academy City. With every time that sound rang out, the cracks got larger. Just like an aftershock, the earth trembled and buildings frighteningly shook. None of the bystanders made a sound. Now, courage was needed to move one's sight away from this. Almost everyone was just blankly witnessing this scene.

"Urgh…"

At this time, Yomikawa Aiho woke up.

In her hazy consciousness she heard a roar. A roar that was more frightening than a beast's, more terrifying than a demon's. But she felt it was only the crying sounds of a helpless child.

He must be stopped.

Yomikawa thought naturally.

"Yomikawa!"

But, before she could act on her thought, her wrist had been grabbed by someone and was been taken speedily away from the scene. Such efficient skills could only mean it was someone from Anti-Skill that had taken her away. Though unlike Yomikawa who was in her jersey, this person had the full set of combat equipment such as guns and protective gear.

"…Let me go, Saigou. I'm not—"

"No way, Yomikawa!"

Yomikawa wanted to struggle, but she didn't have the strength. Now, from above came the *pada pada pada* sounds that stirred the air. She looked up, and black helicopters were flying in the sky above her. They were the state-of-the-art Six Wings.

"The recently restored satellite system detected anomalies. A distortion that not even the Theory of Relativity can explain has spread for the surrounding 100m. The analysis unit thinks it's the result of the AIM diffusion field being interfered with in a special way."

“And you people attacked the cause of this distortion without regard of your own lives? Stop kidding around!”

In her shouting Yomikawa ended up retching blood out from her mouth once more. This time she finally succeeded in breaking out of Saigou’s grasp. But when she turned to look at her surroundings she discovered there were large numbers of fully-armed Anti-Skill members, powered suits, and armored vehicles setting up their positions. It was a scenario that was almost like it came straight out of a nightmare. An intense feeling of 'this is unreal' assaulted Yomikawa, who had some understanding about Accelerator’s past.

When Accelerator was younger, he had been surrounded like this, lost all hope in life, and after surrendering he had been thrown into dark research labs.

This tragedy must not be allowed to repeat itself.

Yomikawa ignored the wound on the side of her stomach, and blocked the way in front of the other Anti-Skill members while she herself was covered in blood.

“Put down your guns! We don’t need those to convince Accelerator!”

“But, Yomikawa!”

“Do you know who it is standing there?! That is a child that we must protect! Pointing guns at children, I’ll never agree! How could I possibly agree to something like this!!”

Accelerator roared towards the sky.

The black wings behind him had surged out even more fiercely.

“Uwaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhh!!”

Don! A shock wave spread out from him and assaulted everyone present.

This wasn’t a physical attack, but a more simple instinctive reaction to their lives being threatened. The animal instinct everyone had was making everyone there feel like their chest was being compressed. If someone wasn’t careful they would fall to the ground from this intense pressure. Accelerator’s anger wasn’t directed at the bystanders or at Anti-Skill. These things were no longer any concern for

him. None of these mattered, the shards of these emotions were enough to let him rule this world, conquer this world, and destroy this world.

His target was supposed to be only Kakine Teitoku.

But, was one person really enough to let him release all that fury? After losing his target, would the aimless fury be directed at someone else? This possibility, no, this danger, was what people were afraid of.

(Dammit, is there… no other… ways left?)

Yomikawa tried to get close to Accelerator, but blood spurted out from her mouth. After seeing that Saigou panicked and quickly restrained her from behind and immobilized her. Even though she couldn't move, she still stared wide-eyed at Accelerator.

(Is there really no way to stop Accelerator? Like so, would that child's future be ended right here because of something as insignificant as this?!)

With another roar, the world had been dyed black. His black wings were showing despair beyond the territory of humans. Even without orders, some of the Anti-Skill members had raised their guns. But as soon as the trigger was pulled everything will be over. Accelerator's soul would be shattered once more, and it was possible that this time it could not be saved.

In front of the overwhelming power, anyone would lose hope.

They could only tremble in a corner, and pray they didn't get dragged into this.

In front of these people…

Their last hope (TN: reads as 'Last Order') had descended upon them.

The girl around 10 years old was running towards that intersection, pushing past the people that were bound by fear. She had brown hair around shoulder length, a lively expression, and wore a sky-blue one-piece dress with a male's t-shirt over it.

'I'm looking for a lost child', she once said.

Now that the child she was looking for was in front of her, she showed no fear. With the situation getting worse by the moment, she didn't care and went straight to Accelerator. From the bystanders' view everything was beyond repair, but nobody stopped her. Because by this time, she was too close to the center of this destruction.

"I found you, says Misaka as Misaka tries to communicates with you slowly."

She got closer towards the still howling Accelerator.

Accelerator slowly turned his head around.

Boom! an explosive sound rang out, as if a gale had swept through.

The action the strongest Level 5 in Academy City took was simple. The jet black wings ripped through the air, and with overwhelmingly massive power dealt a destructive blow.

In everyone's mind there was a picture of tragedy being painted.

Where Last Order's tiny body was being scattered onto the asphalt in pieces.

However…

With a sharp sound, the black wings stopped in front of Last Order.

The attack Accelerator had fired was stopped by an invisible wall. The black wings had stopped mere millimeters away from her face, going no closer and only trembling. But, she shouldn't have had the power to block this. Even if the whole world was searched, someone that could have blocked that blow might not be found.

If she couldn't do it, then who, and how had they blocked the black wings?

Yomikawa, who could only blankly stare at this situation, finally thought of an answer.

"Accelerator…"

Academy City's strongest Level 5. If someone could stop this unrivaled

destructive power, then it could only be the one who possessed this power himself. At the end of the end, Accelerator had stopped his black wings.

The black wings were trembling.

Trembling as if a monster was whimpering.

At this time, a *boom* sound of gunpowder exploding rang out.

Yomikawa swiftly turned around, and saw one of the Anti-Skill members had opened fire without permission.

Not good!

Even though it was obvious that Last Order was right next to Accelerator, a gun was still fired.

Accelerator's black wings split apart, separated into countless sharp wings and aimed at the Anti-Skill members around him. Last Order had finally realized they had been attacked.

Boom! An attack with Accelerator at its center was projected out around him.

"Stop! says Misaka as Misaka advises!"

Last Order said one sentence.

As if taking that sentence as a cue, the point of the sharp wing that reached for the throat of an Anti-Skill member suddenly stopped.

"It is alright now, says Misaka as Misaka holds out her arms."

The young girl knew what the current situation was. Even though she knew how dangerous an existence Accelerator was, she still reached out with her slim hands.

"You don't have to do something like this anymore, says Misaka as Misaka tries to convey the correct words."

As if to blow apart these words, the black wings once again struck toward her.

But, the black wings once again stopped in front of her, along with a *kacha* blunt sound. Accelerator was conflicted. In his heart, he continued to scream out to give up on everything. If he had to have memories of something like this, if he had to repeat these kinds of tragedies, he might as well abandon everything. But, in the end he could not abandon them. Even though he could kill her with only a finger, even though he could blow her away easily, no matter what, Accelerator could not abandon this hope.

“Uwaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahh! Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!!”

Roar.

The sound of the black wings waving about could still be heard.

But, the overwhelming pressure from before could not be felt now. Last Order only watched on. Facing the waves of attack coming one after another, she didn’t even blink. Because of the trust between them, she didn’t feel the slightest bit of fear.

The twin wings swelled to the largest it ever had, and with all its might it swung down onto her.

And when this attack had reached in front of Last Order, Accelerator’s own movements stopped.

With his head lowered, nobody could see his expression.

The black wings behind him soundlessly dispersed. Now Accelerator’s body lost all its strength, and fell shakily slowly towards the front.

Last Order opened her arms wide, and welcomed Accelerator into her arms. Even though she almost collapsed under his weight she still held him tight and would not let go.

Finally, she whispered into Accelerator’s ear softly,

“What a relief, says Misaka as Misaka is glad.”

Epilogue: The Victory Prize for Those who Survived. *Nano_Size_Data.*

When he came to, Accelerator was in an ambulance.

However, the equipment inside was different from that of a real ambulance. Most likely, this ambulance was not headed for the hospital. It was taking him somewhere else.

He couldn't see who was in the driver's seat from his position. No one else was on-board. On the floor next to him was a cell phone. It started ringing the second he noticed it as if he were being watched.

Accelerator picked it up and a voice that was familiar to him in a certain way reached his ear.

"You went a bit too far this time"

"…You again. I'm not going to sit here and be lectured by you people who watch from above without doing a damn thing. The people with the right to act arrogantly are the ones who actually risked their lives trying to stop me."

"You understand, don't you?"

"Tch," Accelerator clicked his tongue in irritation at the person on the phone who wasn't listening to him. "Yes, *I understand*."

"Well, I was the one that gave you the information on Kakine Teitoku, so I won't be too hard on you. I just wish you had put my information to better use."

"What's my penalty?"

"Hmm, good question. Merely increasing your debt won't really seem like

anything to you and you're too important to dispose of. What am I to do with you?"

The tone to those words pissed Accelerator off, but the person on the phone suddenly asked an unexpected question.

"By the way, are you really intending on coming back?"

"Ah?"

"I'm simply curious. After falling that far and announcing that you will stand at the very top of the darkness, you still haven't given up on that warmth?"

"*Of course not*."

"I see."

"Aren't you going to stop me?"

"I'll give you the right to struggle. Although I can't guarantee you that I have the right to grant you that."

"Perfect," Accelerator said and hung up.

He stared at the screen for a bit, but he finally put the phone in his pocket, opened curtain covering the window, and looked outside.

(…Ah.)

The warmth of that small girl still remained inside his arm.

He thought to himself as he clenched his fist as if trying to shake off the sensation.

(I *will* outwit them. I'll outwit Academy City, the fucking higher ups, and everyone else.)

He had the USB drive with the blueprint to the choker-style electrode on it in his pocket.

He had checked it between battles, but the design wasn't a simple one. To create

Part 1, he needed Material 2 and Equipment 3 and, to make them, he needed Devices 4 and 5. Not to mention that it was all done using the frog-faced doctor's original technology. It felt like he was looking at one of Princess Kaguya's impossible tasks. It looked like it was going to take quite some time to analyze the electrode, remove all the unnecessary parts, and create a copy.

Even so Accelerator swore that he would do it.

He finally had a small hint hidden away in his pocket.

Unabara Mitsuki left through the hospital's main entrance.

Xochitl who had come as the organization's assassin would resent how it had all ended. She hadn't been able to carry out her objective, she hadn't been given the ending known as death, and her ultimate weapon, the grimoire original, had been taken from her. Her life now would surely be nothing but pain.

Even so, Xochitl lived on.

She had less than a third of her physical body left leaving her with nothing more than skin wrapped around a fake body, but she was still alive. That made Unabara happy. It was nothing more than personal satisfaction, but it really helped him out.

"Gh…"

His consciousness wavered.

A great amount of information had entered his head when he had taken in the original. However, it hadn't mixed well with his human body. If he relaxed his attention, an intense pain would run from the top of his head down to the bottom of his feet as if he had iron sand in the folds of his brain.

(Maybe I shed a little too much blood…)

Unabara Mitsuki reached into his pocket.

He pulled out the true original that he had separated from Xochitl. The grimoire

was a scroll written on animal skin. He spread out the several knowledge-filled meters and scanned through it.

The pain lessened a bit.

When all the pain was gone, he would truly understand the original.

(Ha ha. If the Anglican Church found this, I'd be taken out for sure.)

But that original was power.

And he needed power.

(…I was desperate when I entered the dark side of Academy City.)

He carefully rolled the scroll back up and stuck it back in his pocket.

(What's going on in the organization? Why was a kind girl like Xochitl turned into an assassin? I need to head back there once more.)

Unabara Mitsuki looked ahead carrying his new power.

He didn't look into the depths of the darkness, but the Aztec magician did not hesitate.

From a distance, Musujime Awaki stared at the juvenile hall with smoke rising from it.

Something like a bandage was wrapped around her bloody leg. It was organic artificial skin made of corn fiber. It felt weird to her, but her body's regenerative ability would eventually unite with it and shape it into "human skin" without leaving a scar.

"…"

Without looking at her painful wound, she continued to stare at the juvenile hall.

Her comrades were there. She had become a pawn of the dark side of Academy City in order to ensure their safety. But when the place had actually been

attacked, Academy City hadn't even called in Anti-Skill. And yet when the mercenaries had crossed Academy City's outer wall, the latest attack helicopters, the HsAFH-11's, had been sent in.

(As I thought, I can only trust them so far.)

Nevertheless, she wasn't going to immediately rise up in revolt. Academy City had them in its power. Even if she managed to free her comrades from their cells, they had nowhere to run. Musujime Awaki herself had just recently suppressed Skill-Out when they were making secret plans in the back allies. The odds were that, if she recklessly let her comrades flee, they would meet a similar fate. It was possible the higher ups had sent Musujime on that mission so she would make that very connection.

But…

(I will return this favor), swore Musujime.

She determined that she would carve in her heart the truth that she had realized and the feelings that had sprouted in her on that day. The stage where she relied on some unknown person to protect her comrades was over. From now on, she would create a protective wall of things she could confirm with her own eyes and touch with her own hands.

Musujime Awaki looked back in the direction of the juvenile hall once more and then turned her back on it.

She left silently and thought.

(I *will* rescue you from there.)

At an unknown time and in an unknown place, Accelerator, Tsuchimikado Motoharu, Unabara Mitsuki, and Musujime Awaki gathered together.

Tsuchimikado had a glove made of machines on his hand. There were long glass claws on the index finger and the middle finger. The blood-smeared device was the one that Kakine Teitoku had before.

It was called the Tweezers.

Accelerator stared at it and expressed his shock.

“So you took advantage of the confusion to recover it? I can’t believe you were hiding among the crowd of onlookers.”

“Apparently, a nanodevice known as Underline is stored inside. It seems School was trying to collect Underline from the air to examine it.”

(How do you know that much?) Accelerator thought suspiciously, but he decided Tsuchimikado must have been taking secret actions of his own.

Unabara was looking unwell and he slowly asked a question.

“What did the data inside say?”

“Underline is the core of Aleister’s direct communications network. The information inside is of a completely different level from what you would find in a normal databank.”

Come to think of it, when Accelerator attacked the residence of Thomas Platinumburg, a member of the board of directors, he had tried to steal information there. When he had, he hadn’t been able to get any information above a certain level, but that could have been because the information was divided by level of secrecy between the normal network and the special network created by Underline.

Musujime spoke with a bored expression on her face.

“What a pain. So what kind of information was hidden on that nanodevice?”

“Wait a second. I’m getting it now.”

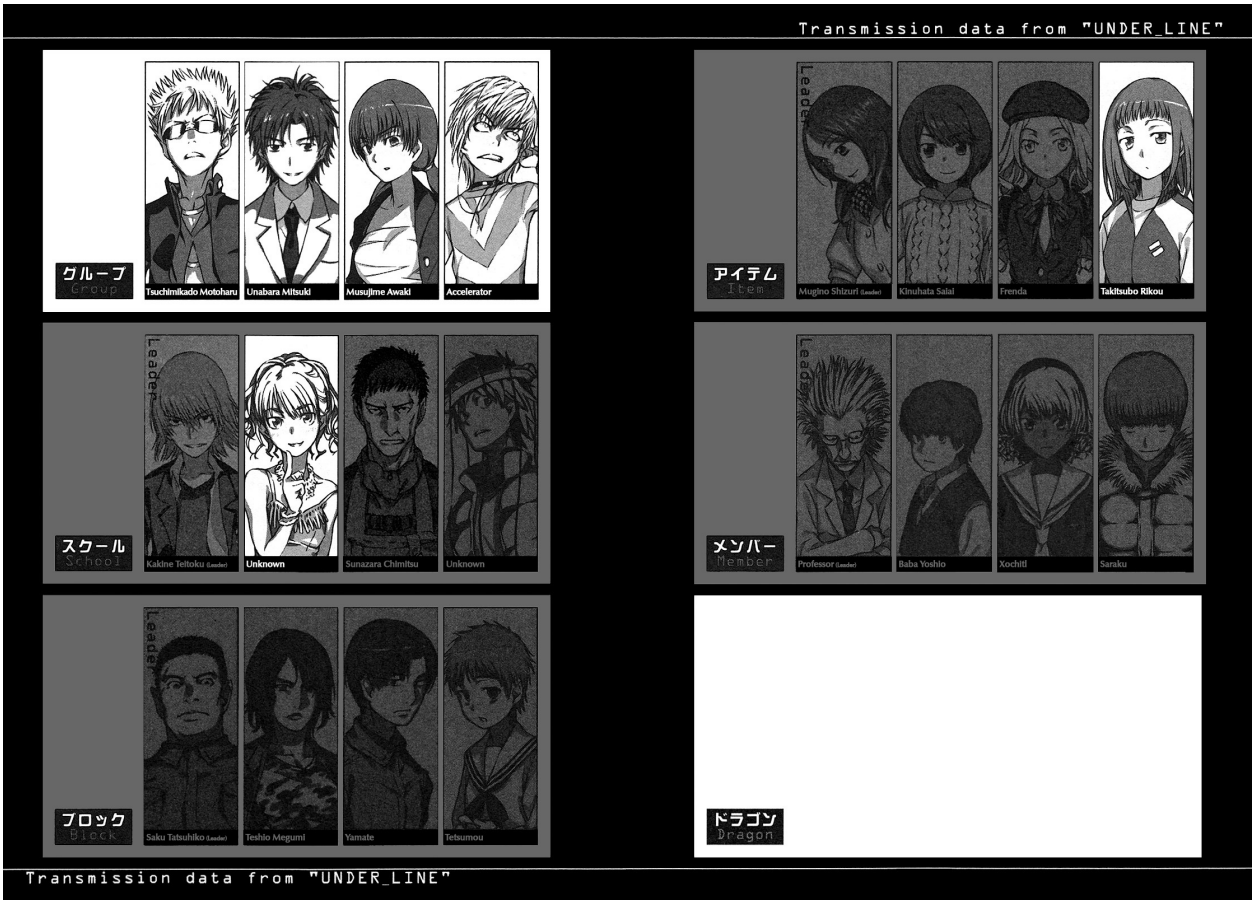
The small monitor on the portion of the Tweezers that went on the back of the hand gave an electronic beep. The result of the analysis that looked like corrupted text scrolled across at high speed and it was soon replaced by the proper form of the results.

“It’s the various codes treated as secret in the dark side of Academy City.”

“Could it be a hint towards overcoming them?”

“The names are…Group, School, Item, Member, and Block…This one is the Tweezers…This is data on the Hikoboshi II and then the blueprints for the juvenile hall…”

“Secret codes? You say it’s something as grandiose as that, but it’s just information the higher ups are gathering to keep an eye on Group’s actions. Seeing this data now does us no-…”



“There’s one more,” said Tsuchimikado and everyone in Group focused on the Tweezers’ screen. They interpreted the fact that Tsuchimikado had made a distinction between this piece of information and the others as meaning that it was different than the rest.

That is, it was a new piece of information.

Tsuchimikado slowly read off the text that was displayed.

“The last one on the list is…Dragon.”

After all that fighting, they had made a tiny, tiny discovery.

Now that the four members of Group had a new key, they began moving again.

Afterword

To those who have bought the books one at a time: Welcome back.

To those that have bought them all at once: Welcome.

This is Kamachi Kazuma.

Volume 15 was all out science. The seven Level 5s, an agricultural building, nanodevices, unmanned attack helicopters, a satellite, computer viruses, Skill-Out… It feels like all of the science side keywords that had appeared bit by bit throughout the series all came at once.

This volume's theme was "the dark side of Academy City" and "emotionless story". Also, Accelerator's villainous trip down the path of evil was an important point. I call him evil, but the aftertaste he leaves you with isn't so bad. I was going for a refreshing feeling regarding him once you had flipped through all of the pages. I wonder if I succeeded.

I think this volume had the most new characters introduced in a single volume (if you don't count the Sisters) so far. But the circle of characters didn't end up expanding. I suppose that's one of the differences between Kamijou Touma and Accelerator.

Many thanks to my illustrator Haimura-san and the one in charge of the project, Miki-san. It ended up being a rather messy story, but I thank you for sticking with it to the end.

I would also like to thank all the readers. As usual, I've digressed quite a bit, but I truly thank you for flipping through all the pages this far.

And now you will be closing the pages.

I pray that you will open the pages of the next volume.

And I will lay my pen down for now.

…It feels like you could call the white one a chivalrous thief or something.

-Kamachi Kazuma

Toaru Majutsu no Index — Volume 15

Author: **Kamachi Kazuma**

Illustrator: **Haimura Kiyotaka**

Translated by **Js06**, **Joay** & **Flere821**

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Prologue  - Joay – Completed
Chapter 1 - Joay – Completed
Chapter 2 - Part 1 - Joay;
            Parts 2+ - Js06 – Completed
Chapter 3 - Js06 – Completed
Chapter 4 - Js06 – Completed
Chapter 5 - Flere821 – Completed
Epilogue  - Js06 – Completed
Afterword - Js06 – Completed
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